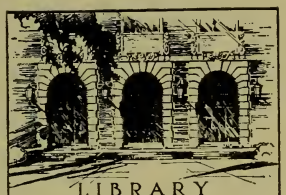
# THE MAN WITH A SECRET

FERGUS HUME



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# THE MAN WITH A SECRET.

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## A Novel.

BY

FERGUS HUME,

Author of

"THE MYSTERY OF A HANSOM CAB," "MADAME MIDAS," "THE PICCADILLY PUZZLE," "MISS MEPHISTOPHELES," ETC., ETC.

There are those in this world whose egotism is so profound, that they look upon creation as designed for their sole benefit, and take advantage of all opportunities furnished by Fate, to gain unto themselves exceeding riches and honour, although prosperity to one may mean ruin to many.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

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TO

MY DEAR FATHER,

JAMES HUME,

THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

BY HIS SON,

FERGUS.

The mocking fiend who near us stands
  Entices us to evil deeds;
He binds our souls in sensual bands
  The mocking fiend who near us stands;
But some good woman-angel pleads
  For mercy at Almighty hands;
With such for guide what mortal heeds
  The mocking fiend who near us stands?

# THE MAN WITH A SECRET.

## CHAPTER I.

### AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

"With anxious dread have I avoided thee,
Thou haunting evil of my early days,
Yet by some trick of Fate we meet again;
I pray thee, sir, let me go far away,
And place the roaring seas between us twain,
There is but sorrow in our comradeship."

It was the high road to the village of Garsworth, wide, deeply rutted, and somewhat grass-grown, with a tall edge of yellow-blossomed gorse on the one side, and on the other a ragged, broken fence, over which leaned a man absorbed in meditation, his eyes fixed upon the setting sun.

The fence, rotten and moss-tufted, ran along the edge of a little hill, the slope of which had been lately reaped, and was

now covered with bristly yellow stubble, variegated by bare-looking patches of brownish earth.

At the bottom of the hill flowed the narrow river Gar, with its sluggish waters rolling lazily along between the low mud banks, bordered by rows of pollard willows and lush rank grasses which hid the burrows of the water-rats. Beyond, towards the distant hills, stretched the damp, melancholy fen-lands, with their long lines of slimy ditches, still pools of black water, and scattered clumps of stunted trees. Still further away appeared a scanty fringe of forest, above which could be seen the square, grey tower of a church, and over all glared an angry red sky barred with thin lines of heavy clouds, looming intensely black against the accentuating crimson light behind.

An evil-looking scene it was, for over the brooding loneliness and desolation of the

fen-lands flared the fierce scarlet of the sunset, turning the slender line of the river and the sombre pools of water to the tint of blood, as though they had been smitten with the Egyptian plague.

A chill wind, heavy with the unwholesome miasma of the fens was blowing over the moist earth, and across the plain floated a vaporous white mist, making the stunted trees look weird and spectral behind its shadowy veil.

The man, leaning over the fence, took a cigarette out of his mouth and shivered slightly.

"Ugh!" he muttered, with an uneasy shudder, "it's like the Valley of the Shadow of Death." Then, replacing the cigarette, he continued contemplating the uncanny-looking landscape to which the term was singularly applicable.

It was a curious face upon which shone the red sunlight, being long and narrow,

with lantern jaws and a thin, hawk-like nose. Thread-like black eyebrows in a straight line above piercing dark eyes and a scanty black moustache twisted jauntily at the ends over tightly-closed lips. Curly hair, the colour of ebony, worn longer than usual, and touched at the temples with grey, appeared from under his soft wideawake, around which was twisted a blue handkerchief with white spots. A livid, cadaverous-looking face, with the haggard expression of one who had lived a fast life; nevertheless it appeared full of animation and nervous energy.

He was tall, being much above the average height, with sloping shoulders and a slender, well-knit figure, clad in a rough suit of grey homespun, which he wore with a certain natural grace. His feet were well-shaped and neatly shod in tan-coloured boots, and his hands, long and slender, were those of an artist.

Not strictly handsome, perhaps, but with a certain insolent dash of recklessness about him which suited his Spanish-looking face, and stamped him at once as a Bohemian. A man who cared for no one so long as his personal desires were gratified, a man who would stop at nothing to gratify those desires, in short, a man who had lived forty-five years in the world without making a single friend; which fact speaks for itself. A thorough scamp, ever on the edge of an abyss, yet by some miracle never losing his balance, Basil Beaumont had fascinated many men and women, but they always found his friendship too expensive to maintain; therefore the result was ever the same, they retired sooner or later, on some pretext or another, leaving him solitary and alone.

Mr. Beaumont was smoking a cigarette —he was always smoking cigarettes—morn, noon, and night those deadly little rolls of

paper were between his thin lips, and though doctors warned him of the danger to his nerves, he laughed at their croakings.

"Nerves, my dear sir," he said lightly; "men in my position can't afford to have nerves; they are a luxury for the rich and foolish. Why should I have nerves? I don't drink; I don't run away with other men's wives; I don't fret over the unavoidable—bah! smoking is my one redeeming vice."

He had a number of other vices, however, as many young men found to their cost. True, he himself did not drink, but he led others to do so, nor did he covet his neighbour's wife, yet he was by no means averse to playing the part of Sir Pandarus of Troy, provided it was to his own interest to do so. Moreover, he gambled.

It was in this terrible passion—rarely, if ever conquered—that he found his greatest delight. The green cloth-covered table,

the painted hieroglyphics of the cards, the hopes, the fears, the gains, the losses, were all to him but a representation of his daily life on a small scale. He gambled with men as he gambled with cards, meeting varied fortunes in both, and risking his luck as recklessly in the game of Life as in the game of baccarat. He was a scamp, a scoundrel, a blackleg of the deepest dye, bankrupt in pocket and in illusions; yet he always kept within the limits of the law, and moreover, sinned in an eminently gentlemanly manner, which robbed the sordid, feverish life he was leading of its most repulsive features.

Why this artificial man, who lived only in the glare of the gas-lamps, and, owl-like, shunned the searching light of the day, had come to such an out-of-the-way village as Garsworth was a puzzle, but nevertheless a puzzle easy of solution. His object was two-fold. In the first place, he had

left London to escape the demands of persistent creditors, and in the second, being a native of the dull little hamlet, he had returned to visit the scenes of his youth, not seen by him for three-and-twenty years.

It was not a sentimental longing—no, Mr. Beaumont and sentiment had long since parted company; but Garsworth was a dead and alive place where no one would think of looking for him, so he could stay there in safety until he saw a chance of arranging his pecuniary affairs and leaving the Arcadia he detested for the London he loved.

An artist by profession, though he had not touched a brush for years, he found it necessary to resume his old employment as a reason for his sojourn in Garsworth, for the honest rustics were somewhat suspicious of Basil Beaumont, his character having been none of the best when he left his native place to seek his fortune. So he

lived quietly at the principal inn of the village, dawdled about the fields, sketched picturesque landscapes in a desultory manner, and in the meantime corresponded with a dear brother hawk in Town as to his chances of return to the metropolis.

His cigarette burnt down rapidly as he leaned over the fence thinking of his future, so throwing away the stump, he took out his tobacco-pouch and a little book of rice paper, in order to manufacture another, talking to himself meanwhile as is the fashion of solitary men.

"Two weeks," he said musingly, while he deftly rolled the tobacco in his slender fingers, "two weeks in this blessed place—well, there's one good thing, the rest will do me good, and I'll go back to Town as steady as a rock; the medicine is disagreeable, but the result will be excellent. What bad luck I've had lately—everything seems against me. I'll have to make a big effort

to get some cash, or I'll end my days in a workhouse—ugh!" shivering again, "not that—God, how I dread poverty! Never mind," he went on gaily, shrugging his shoulders, "there are plenty of fools in this world, and as everything was created for a special purpose, I presume *le bon Dieu* made fools to feather clever men's nests."

He laughed softly at this cynicism, then, lighting the cigarette, placed it in his mouth and resumed his soliloquy.

"Forty-five and still living on my wits. Ah, Basil, my friend, you've been an awful fool, and yet, if I had to live my life over again, I don't know that I would act differently. Circumstances have been too strong for me. With a certain income I might have been an honest man, but Fate —Pish!—why do I blame that unhappy deity whom men always make a scapegoat for their own shortcomings? It's myself, and none other, I should curse. Well, well,

rich or poor, honest man or scoundrel, I'll go with all the rest of my species through the valley of the shadow."

He raised his eyes once more to the melancholy scene before him, when suddenly his quick ear caught the sound of footsteps coming briskly along the road, and he smiled to himself as the invisible pedestrian began to whistle "Garryowen."

"Plenty of spirits," he muttered, flicking the ash off his cigarette, "or perhaps not enough, seeing he has to cheer himself with Irish melodies."

The footsteps came nearer, and shortly afterwards a man paused in the centre of the road as he saw the still figure leaning indolently against the fence. A fair-haired, ruddy-faced man, of medium height, arrayed in a walking suit, with a knapsack on his shoulder, and a heavy stick in his hand.

"Hullo!" he cried, tapping his stick on the ground, "how far is it to the village?"

Basil Beaumont started slightly when he heard the voice, then an evil smile crossed his face as he turned lazily round to answer the question.

"About one mile, Nestley," he replied distinctly.

As he spoke the pedestrian gave a cry, and with a muttered oath sprang forward to where the other stood.

"Beaumont!" he whispered, recoiling at the sight of that mocking Mephistophelean countenance smiling at his emotion.

"At your service," said Beaumont, carelessly putting his hands in his pockets. "And what are you doing in this part of the country, Doctor Duncan Nestley?"

Nestley did not answer, but stared fixedly at the artist as if he were turned into stone, but the other met his gaze steadily, and seemed rather amused at his scrutiny.

'You take a long time to recognise an old friend," he observed at length, blowing a thin wreath of smoke.

"Friend," echoed Nestley, with a deep sigh, recovering himself. "Yes, you were my friend, Basil Beaumont."

"Why 'were'?" asked the artist coolly.

"Because it was you who so nearly ruined my life," replied Nestley in a deep voice.

Beaumont smiled in a saturnine manner.

"I," he said in a gibing tone. "My good fellow, you do me too much honour. I would never dare to ruin so celebrated an individual as Duncan Nestley, F.R.C.S., and deuce knows what other letters of the alphabet."

The pedestrian turned on him fiercely, and, stepping forward, confronted him with clenched fists. The artist never blenched, but eyed his angry antagonist steadily. So Nestley, with all the wrath dying out of his

face, fell back into his former position with a dreary laugh.

"You have the one virtue of a scoundrel, I see," he said bitterly. "Courage."

"Man of one virtue and ten thousand crimes," quoted Beaumont, easily. "Faith, it's something to have even one virtue in this degenerate age. Where are you going?" he added, as Nestley turned away.

"Going?" echoed the doctor, fiercely. "Anywhere, so long as it is away from you."

Beaumont raised his eyebrows in affected surprise, then, shrugging his shoulders, took out his watch.

"It is now between five and six o'clock," he said, putting it back again, "and it will be dark by the time we reach Garsworth, which is the nearest village. I am staying there, but if you choose to go back again in order to avoid the moral leper, I daresay you'll reach Shunton by twelve o'clock

"I'm not going with you," reiterated Nestley, resolutely, as the artist stepped into the road.

"'Nobody axed you, sir, she said,'" retorted Beaumont, with a sneer, sauntering on. "Good-bye; a pleasant journey."

Nestley looked at the sky, out of which the red light was rapidly dying. A few stars glimmered in the pale flush of colour, and the chill breeze was growing colder, while the mists lay over the fen-lands like a thick white veil. He was cold and hungry, so the prospect of getting something to eat and a night's rest instead of trudging back wearily to Shunton, decided him. He shook himself impatiently, made a few steps forward, then paused irresolutely.

"Bah! Why should I mind?" he said angrily to himself. "Beaumont can do me no harm now. After five years I hardly see how his influence can affect me. I'll chance it, anyhow."

Away in the distance he could see the tall form of the artist strolling easily along, so, having paused a moment to light his pipe, he strode rapidly after him. Even as he did so there flashed across his mind, with the rapidity of lightning, the phrase, "Lead us not into temptation," and a shiver, not caused by the chill wind, passed over his body, but he dismissed the warning with an uneasy laugh, and walked on quickly in the track of his evil genius.

## CHAPTER II.

### HIS EVIL GENIUS.

"Much sorrow didst thou bring to me of old,
Tainted my life by poisonous words and deeds,
Turned holy thoughts to evil—made me dread
To face the fearless looks of honest men,
Lest they should spy my quick-learnt devilries,
And cry, 'Off, off; this fellow is a knave.'"

GARSWORTH was one of those queer, old-fashioned villages which, owing to their isolated position, yet retain the primitive simplicity of earlier ages. The nearest railway station, Duxby Junction, to which steam and electricity continually carried the news of the world, was fully twenty miles distant, so that in this out-of-the-way village the rustics heard but little of the doings of the nations, being content to remain in a state of Arcadian ignorance, as their forefathers had done before them.

There was not even a stage-coach to Duxby, and the only means of communication was by the carriers' carts, which went weekly along the dusty high road, drawn lazily by their sleek horses. The nearest market town was Shunton, almost as quiet and primitive as Garsworth, and the sturdy farmers going there on market days sold their cattle and wheat, picked up such small items of news as had drifted thither from Duxby, then returned to their homes perfectly satisfied with life and with themselves. Well-to-do folks were these yeomen, for many rich farms lay hidden in the wide fen-lands—farms which had descended from father to son through many generations, and as neither agrarian agitation nor vexed questions of rents had penetrated to this remote spot, they tilled their lands, looked up to their landlords, and pursued their monotonous lives in peace.

The village, built on a primitive plan,

consisted of one long, wide street, with a similar one running crosswise to it, so that the little town was divided into four almost equal sections. Where the four roads met appeared a large open space doing duty as the village green, in the centre of which stood an antique stone cross with elaborate carvings thereon, much worn by time, and said to have been erected by one Geoffrey Garsworth on his return from the third crusade. As a proof of this, there could be seen amid the carvings, representations of palm branches and scallop shells, both symbolical of eastern vegetation and pilgrim wanderings; but Dr. Larcher, the vicar of Garsworth—an ardent archæologist—maintained that the cross had been placed there by the Cistercian monks, who once occupied a monastery near the village. The worthy vicar, being of a somewhat polemical nature, was wont to wax warm on the subject, and held strong opinions as to the

cross and the church, which opinions he was willing enough to impart to any curious stranger who might chance to have antiquarian leanings.

And a beautiful old church it was—of irregular architecture, with heavy stone pillars supporting both round and pointed arches of the Norman Romanesque style, remarkably fine stained glass windows, and a high, elaborately carved roof of dark oak. Standing at the end of the village, near the bridge, the graveyard in which it was placed, sloped down to the river's edge, and at times the mighty shadow of the square tower fell across the stream.

A little further down was the vicarage, built of grey stone in the quaint Tudor fashion, enclosing a green square on three sides, while the fourth was open to the Gar. From its grounds could be seen the graceful span of the bridge, a somewhat modern structure, which led on to a wide common

overgrown with golden gorse, and far away in the distance amid a thick forest of beech and elm and oak, arose the towers of Garsworth Grange, wherein lived the lord of the Manor.

The village possessed only one inn, quaintly entitled "The House of Good Living," an ancient building as fantastic as its name. Standing somewhat back from the street, it was built of grey stone, with heavy beams set into the walls in the old-fashioned style, and the upper storey projected over the lower one in a cumbersome manner, apparently threatening every moment to overbalance itself. There were wide, diamond-paned casements, with rows of flower-pots containing bright scarlet geraniums standing on the broad ledges, and on the left a tall gable jutted out some distance from the main building, while in the corner, thus formed, was the huge porch, with its heavy wooden benches for the con-

venience of village cronies. The space in front was of cobbled stones down to the street, and there stood the tall pole with the swinging sign, whereon was bravely painted a baron of beef and a tankard of beer as an earnest of the good cheer within. The roof was of thatch, grey and weatherworn, neatly trimmed round the windows and eaves, while above towered the great stacks of twisted, red-tinged chimneys. Altogether, a typical English inn of the stage-coach period, severely respectable and intensely conservative.

It was quite dark when Dr. Nestley reached this haven of rest, but the generous light within gushed from the windows in ruddy streams with a most inviting air of comfort. The door stood wide open, letting out a flood of mellow light into the chilly darkness, and the new comer could hear the murmur of men's voices, with every now and then a coarse laugh, while the smell of

tobacco permeated the atmosphere. Evidently the village gossips were holding high festival, and as Nestley passed into the porch he saw dimly through the smoke-clouded air a number of them seated in the tap-room, puffing steadily at their pipes and draining their tankards with great contentment.

Job Kossiter, the landlord of this house of entertainment, soon made his appearance in answer to Nestley's imperative summons, and stood waiting orders in stolid silence. A large fat man, was Mr. Kossiter, with a large fat face, ruddy with health, a brain of bovine slowness, and a habit of repeating all questions asked him in a meditative manner, in order to give himself time to consider his answer.

"I want a bed for to-night, landlord," said Nestley, leaning against the wall and surveying the rotund proportions of mine host, "and at present, something to eat."

Mr. Kossiter fixed his ox-like eyes on the stranger and repeated the words slowly like a child learning its lesson.

"He wants," observed Job stolidly "a bed for to-night and summat to eat; sir, you can have 'em both."

"Right you are," replied the doctor cheerfully. "Get something ready at once and show me to a bedroom, I want to wash my hands."

"He wants," repeated Kossiter mechanically, "to wash his hands. "Margery!"

In answer to this call, a bright, brisk-looking young woman, in a neat print gown, stepped forward and confronted Nestley.

"He wants," said Job, looking from Margery to Nestley, "a bed, summat to eat, a room and a wash;" then, having given all the requisite information, he rolled slowly away to attend to the wants of the rustics in the tap-room, while

Margery, in a voice as sharp as her appearance, invited Nestley to follow her to his room.

"Lor, sir," she said shrilly, tripping lightly up the stairs, "if I'd only knowed as you was comin', I'd have got things a bit straight, but father never does tell, father don't."

"He didn't know I was coming," replied Nestley as he entered the bedroom and took off his knapsack. "I'm a bird of passage—bring me some hot water."

"Yes, sir," replied Margery, pausing with her hand on the handle of the door, "and anything to eat, sir?"

"Of course—cold beef, pickles—whatever there is. I'm too hungry to be dainty."

"You won't have supper with the other gentleman, sir, will you?" asked Margery, "Mr. Beaumont, sir."

"No, no," replied Nestley harshly, a dark

shadow crossing his face. "I want to be alone."

"Very good, sir," said Margery, rather alarmed at his tone of voice. "I'll bring the hot water, sir—yes, sir."

She closed the door after her, and Nestley, sitting down on the bed, gnawed his moustache savagely.

"Under the same roof," he growled viciously. "I don't know if I'm wise—pshaw, it doesn't matter, he won't do me any more harm, I've got no money, and Beaumont doesn't care about doing anything for nothing—my poverty is my best shield against him."

At this moment Margery knocked at the door and handed in his hot water, so he postponed his ideas on the subject of Mr. Beaumont while he made himself respectable. Having washed the dust of the road from his face and hands, he brushed his clothes, arranged his hair, and then de-

scended to the parlour of the inn, where he found a plentifully-spread supper-table awaiting him, and Margery lighting the lamp.

The parlour was a quaint, low-ceilinged room, all angles, with queer cupboards and unnecessary alcoves in unexpected places, heavy, black oak furniture, baskets of wax fruits and paper flowers, a small harmonium in one corner, and a general air of intense cleanliness and comfort. Dismissing Margery, Dr. Nestley made an excellent supper from a round of corned beef, but pushing away the tankard of ale which stood near him, he filled a glass with water and drank it off. His meal being ended he lighted his pipe, and drawing his chair up to the fire, with a sigh of gratitude, gave himself up to his reflections. The lamp shone with a dim, yellow light, but the ruddy glare of the fire lighted up the room and gleamed on the polished furniture and plaster ceiling. Truly

a pleasant place to dream in, but judging by the frown upon Nestley's face his thoughts were anything but agreeable, for as a matter of fact he was thinking about Basil Beaumont. Whether a sympathetic feeling or a vein of animal magnetism drew the subject of his reflections towards him it is hard to say, but in a very short time the door was pushed silently open, and Mr. Beaumont, cool and complacent, sauntered into the room.

This unwelcomed intruder walked across to the fireplace and, leaning against the mantelpiece, looked down at the indignant Nestley with a bland smile.

"Enjoyed your supper?" he asked coolly, removing his cigarette.

"None the better for seeing you," growled the doctor, drawing hard at his pipe.

"Our excellent Duncan," observed Mr. Beaumont, airily, "is rather cross."

At which impertinent observation Nestley began to show anger.

"What right have you to come into this room?" he asked savagely.

"The best right in the world," retorted Basil, smoothly. "It is a public room; I am one of the public—ergo, I use it."

Dr. Nestley frowned again, and his rather weak mouth quivered nervously as he looked at the placid countenance of the man leaning against the mantelpiece. On his part, Beaumont slipped his hands into his pockets, crossed his long legs and, after glancing curiously at the figure cowering in the armchair began to talk in a delicately-modulated voice, which was one of his greatest charms.

"We were friends five years ago, Nestley, yet now we meet as enemies. I am not, as a rule, curious; but I confess I would like to know the reason."

"You know well enough," said Nestley, sulkily.

"Ah! Let me see. I think in the road to-night you accused me of ruining your life. Pray tell me how—I don't think," observed Mr. Beaumont, reflectively, "I really don't think I borrowed money from you."

Dr. Nestley removed his pipe, and put his hand up to hide the nervous quivering of his mouth. The artist went on smoking placidly, waiting for the other to speak, so seeing this, Nestley, with a great effort, sat up in his chair and looked steadily at him.

"Listen to me, Basil Beaumont," he said, slowly. "Five years ago, when I met you, I was only a boy——"

"Yes, an awful cub," replied Beaumont, insolently. "I taught you all you know."

"You did," retorted Nestley, bitterly,

rising to his feet. "You taught me things of which I had better have remained ignorant. I had a little money——"

"Fairly won by me at cards," murmured Beaumont, coolly.

"I didn't mind that," said Nestley, who was walking up and down the room in a state of uncontrollable agitation, "you had that, and welcome—one must pay for one's experience, I suppose. No; it was not the money, but I did blame you for teaching me to drink wine to excess."

"I!" said Basil, in surprise, "why, I never drink wine to excess, so how could I teach you?"

"Ah!" replied the other, significantly, stopping in his walk, "your head is too strong—mine is not. I was a clever boy, and likely to do well in my profession. You met me when I came up to London—liked me for some inexplicable reason, and

undertook to show me what you called life. With my weak constitution and highly-strung organization drink was like poison to me—it turned me into a maniac. I did not care for it—I had no hereditary love for alcohol, but you were always at my elbow, tempting me to have another glass. My weaker will was overcome by your stronger one. I took drink, and it made me mad, causing me to commit a thousand follies for which I was no more responsible than a child. I got into the habit of taking drinks all day. You encouraged me—God knows why, except for your own selfish ends. Had I remained with you, I would have been in a lunatic asylum or in the gutter but, thank God, my better angel prevailed, and I broke the spell you held over me. Leaving you and the mad life I was then leading, I became a total abstainer, at what cost I need not tell you—no one can ever understand the

struggles and agonies I underwent, but I conquered in the end. For five years I have not touched a drop of liquor, and now—now that I have subdued the devil that once possessed me I meet you once more—you who so nearly ruined me, body and soul."

Beaumont did not move during this long speech, delivered with intense emotion by Nestley, but at its conclusion shrugged his shoulders and addressed himself to the task of making another cigarette.

"A very excellent lecture," he said, scoffingly, "very excellent, indeed, but quite wrong. I did meet you in London, and out of kindness introduced you into decent society, but I certainly did not teach you to make a beast of yourself, as you did!"

"You were always urging me to drink."

"Hospitality only. I asked you to drink

when I did, yet I did not make a fool of myself."

"True! You only made a fool of me. What you could take and what I could take were two very different things. What was drunkenness in me was sobriety in you."

Beaumont laughed and lighted the cigarette he had just made.

"You were an idiot," he said, politely. "When you found drink did you harm you should have left it off."

"Ah! you think that an easy task?"

"It would be—to me."

"To you!" cried Nestley, vehemently, "yes, a practised man of the world like you has his nerves and passions well under control. I was young, inexperienced, enthusiastic, you were cool, calculating and cynical. You drank three times as much as I ever did, but the effect on our natures was different. You were looked

upon as a sober man, I—God help me!—as a drunkard!"

The artist smiled sarcastically.

"Well," he said, coolly, "all this was five years ago—why are you so disagreeable now?"

"I cannot forget how you tried to ruin me."

"Humph!" observed Beaumont, walking to the door, "there's nothing like putting our sins on other people's shoulders; it saves such a lot of unnecessary trouble. However, I don't wish to argue any longer. You reject my friendship, so I've nothing more to say. I daresay you'll be gone by the time I rise in the morning, so, as we're not likely to meet one another again in this life, I'll say good-bye."

He opened the door just as Nestley was about to answer him, when suddenly there was a noise—the voices of men laughing

uproariously, then the sharp bark of a dog, and in another moment a large black cat, with her fur all on end, darted into the room, followed by an eager fox-terrier in a state of great excitement.

## CHAPTER III.

### VILLAGE GOSSIP.

It's very odd the pride we take
In finding out our neighbours' lives,
Tho' idle words a heart may break,
It's very odd the pride we take
In saying this one is a rake,
And that one's luck thro' evil thrives,
It's very odd the pride we take
In finding out our neighbours' lives.

SNARLING and spitting, with blazing eyes and bushy tail, the cat flew round the room rapidly, did a steeplechase over several chairs, and finally took refuge on the mantelpiece, where she stood with arched back, spitting freely, while the fox-terrier, yelping sharply, tried, unsuccessfully, to leap up.

"What a beast of a dog," said Beaumont, tranquilly; "it's Muffins, of course."

"Rather," said a laughing voice at the door, "did you ever know Muffins when he wasn't worrying a cat or killing a rat, or doing something disreputable."

The owner of the voice was a tall young fellow of twenty years of age, with curly fair hair, a fresh complexion, and merry blue eyes. He was positively bubbling over with good nature and excitement, and appeared the embodiment of robust health and animal spirits. Suddenly he caught sight of Nestley, who stood near the fireplace, looking on at the scene with an amused smile.

"Awfully sorry about my dog, sir," he said, taking off his cap with a gay laugh, and striding across the room to where Muffins was performing leaps worthy of an acrobat, "but he believes his mission in life is to kill cats, so at present——"

"He is performing his mission with great zeal," finished Nestley with a smile.

"By the way," interposed Beaumont, raising his voice, "I'd better introduce you two men, Mr. Richard Pemberton—Dr. Duncan Nestley."

Nestley bowed somewhat stiffly, as he thought Beaumont was taking an unwarrantable liberty in acting as he was doing, but Pemberton, with the ingenuousness of youth, caught the doctor's hand and shook it heartily.

"Glad to see you," he said, looking at Nestley, "you will be a perfect God-send in this dull place."

His manner was so cordial, that without being positively rude Nestley could not refuse to be gracious, so seeing that he had attained his object of introducing Nestley as his friend, Mr. Beaumont sauntered out of the room with a cynical smile on his thin lips.

"You'll measure swords with me, will you?" he said to himself, with a short

laugh. "I wouldn't advise you to try that game, my friend."

Meanwhile Pemberton caught hold of Muffins, who was making frantic attempts to seize his feline enemy, whereupon the cat, seeing the coast clear, sprang down and dashed out of the room; but the wary Muffins, wriggling himself free, raced after her, nose on ground, with an occasional sharp yelp.

"There," said Pemberton gaily, "Muffins is provided with an amusing evening, for he'll never leave the cat till he runs her down."

"I'm sorry for the cat."

"You'll be sorry for Muffins when you see him return scratched all over," retorted the lad, whereupon they both laughed.

"Staying here long?" asked Pemberton, eyeing the doctor in a friendly manner.

"Only to night—I'm on a walking tour," replied Nestley carelessly.

"Lucky devil," said the other, thrustin his hands into his pockets, "I've got t stay here."

"Is it your home?"

"In a sort of way, yes—pupil at th vicarage, and all that shoot, don't yo know—it's a five-act funeral of a plac but we manage to get some tra-la-la ou of it."

"Who are we?" asked the docto mightily amused at Mr. Pemberton's co loquialisms.

"Oh! I forgot you're a strange here — why, Reggy Blake, myself, an Priggs."

"Priggs?"

"One of the pupils," explained the com municative Richard, "a jolly ass—write poetry—lines to Chloe, and all that sor of thing—hasn't got an idea beyond th

Muses, as he calls 'em—beastly old frumps —Reggy's a good sort of chappie—he's in the tap-room now—come and see the fun—we often stand beer to the rustics, and they sing us songs—twenty verses long and no stops."

"Do you know Beaumont well?" asked Nestley, following his youthful guide to the tap-room.

"Not very, he's only been here a fortnight, but the vicar knows him; he's a native of these parts; not a bad sort of chap, but awfully stand off the grass; gets up on his hind legs pretty freely. Do you know him?"

"To my cost," replied the doctor bitterly.

Pemberton stared, and was about to ask the meaning of this strange remark, when a burst of laughter sounded from the tap-room, so postponing his inquiry until a more favourable period, he opened

the door and entered, followed by Duncan Nestley.

The Doctor's eyes smarted somewhat with the pungent tobacco smoke, but when he became more accustomed to the cloudy atmosphere, he found himself in a long, low ceilinged room, round which about fifteen men were seated on benches, smoking vigorously.

On a long deal table in the centre stood a number of pewter tankards containing beer, and a large jug filled with the same generous beverage stood at the end. A kerosene lamp hung from the ceiling, diffusing a dull yellow light, and the floor was covered with sawdust, with spittoons placed about.

On the end of the table sat Reginald Blake, who was as dark as Pemberton was fair. A somewhat mournful countenance when in repose, but now sparkling with life and animation. Decidedly

handsome, with an olive complexion, closely-cropped black hair, and a small moustache of the same colour. As he sat there swinging his legs and showing his white teeth with every laugh, Nestley thought he was a very striking figure, although somewhat out of place in that homely room.

"Looks like an Italian," he thought, looking at the tall, lithe figure as Reginald Blake slipped off the table to greet him. "Must have been born in the South, or perhaps he's a Greek born in England, like Keats."

Dick Pemberton lost no time, but then and there introduced Nestley to his friend.

"This is Dr. Nestley, Reggy—stranger here—got the blues, so I brought him here to see the fun."

"Rather homely fun, I'm afraid," said Blake, holding out his hand with a frank

smile. "I'm very pleased to see you, Dr. Nestley. You'll find this noisy, but it's amusing."

"What would the vicar say if he knew two of his pupils were here?" asked Nestley, mischievously.

Both the young men laughed heartily.

"Oh, the dear old boy wouldn't mind," said Pemberton, producing a cigar case, "he trusts us; besides, we work hard all the week, and only get off the chain on Saturday nights."

"Then," observed Reggy, helping himself to a cigar from his friend's case, "we study mankind——"

"As seen in the village inn," finished the doctor, smiling.

"As seen in the village inn," assented Mr. Blake, gravely, lighting his cigar. "Dick and myself are students of human nature."

"It's great fun," observed Dick, con-

fidentially. "If we were in town, I've no doubt we'd go to a music hall, but here we amuse ourselves with rustic simplicity."

"Said simplicity being mythical," said Blake satirically, "but the singing is amusing—I say Jarx," he added, raising his voice, "sing us that ditty of yours."

Jarx, a huge, good-tempered giant, excused himself bashfully, but on being pressed, took a long drink of beer, wiped his large mouth with his sleeve and fixing his eyes on the ceiling began to sing. First he started too low so that his voice sounded as if it came from his boots, then, apologising in a sheepish manner to the company, he began again in a high key. This being the other extreme was found equally unsatisfactory, but on making a third attempt he struck the happy medium and started off into a rustic ditty the chorus of which was solemnly sung by the

company while they rocked slowly to and fro:

"There's the hog tub and the pig tub
And the tub behind the do-o-r
She's gone away with t'other chap
And she'll never come back no more."

Full chorus after long pause. "She wont—"

This song consisted of about ten verses which the singer conscientiously delivered with the chorus to each verse, first as a solo, afterwards with the full strength of the company, who sang impartially in different keys, so that the result was anything but harmonious. By this simple means the song lasted about a quarter-of-an-hour, much to Nestley's amusement and that of the young men, who joined in the chorus with great gusto, Dick gravely conducting with his cigar.

Mr. Jarx having finished his melody, resumed his seat, his pipe and his beer,

mid great applause, and in response to a general demand, a local favourite with a shrill voice sang a ditty about "Four Irish girls who came from the Isle of Wight," which also had the additional attraction of a dance, the music of which was provided by the performer whistling, he being his own orchestra. This double display of genius was received with great rapture and, at its conclusion Nestley, turning to the young men, asked if either of them sang.

"Reggy does," said Dick promptly; "he's got a voice like a nightingale."

"Bosh!" retorted Reggy, reddening under his dark skin. "Why I never had a lesson in my life."

"No, self-taught genius," said the incorrigible Dick. "Come, old man, out with it."

Thus adjured by his friend and being pressed by the doctor, Blake consented and

sang "You'll remember me," that old-fashioned song which contains such a world of pathos.

A tenor voice, pure, rich and silvery as a bell, not cultured in the least, but with rare natural power and an intensity of dramatic expression. One of those sympathetic voices which find their way straight to the heart, and as Blake sang the appealing words of the song, with their haunting, pathetic tenderness, Nestley felt strangely stirred. Even the rustics, dull as they were, fell under the spell of those resonant notes, and when the last word died away like a long-drawn sigh, sat silently pondering, not daring to break the charm by applauding.

"You have a great gift," said Nestley, when the singer ceased. "A wonderful voice."

Blake flushed with pleasure at this word of praise from a stranger, and Dick,

delighted with the eulogy of his friend's talent, chimed in enthusiastically.

"Yes—isn't it jolly? and he sings comic songs—give us one old chap."

Blake would have consented, particularly as the rustics seemed anxious to hear something more suited to their comprehension than the preceding ballad, but Nestley hastily intervened.

"No, no," he said quickly, unwilling to spoil his first impression of that charming voice by hearing it lowered to the level of music hall singing, "don't do that, it will spoil everything."

The young man looked at him in surprise.

"I don't care much about them myself," said Reginald frankly, "but people down here like them better than sentimental ditties."

At this moment, Job Kossiter announced to the assembled company that it was time

to close up, so in a few moments the room was empty of all save Nestley and his two companions. Dick asked him to have a glass of ale but he refused.

"I never drink," he said bluntly, "I'm a teetotaler."

They both opened their eyes at this, but were too polite to make any comments, so in order to relieve the awkwardness of the situation, Dr. Nestley began to speak.

"I suppose you've got some queer characters down here," he said, filling a fresh pipe of tobacco.

"Rather," said Dick, promptly, "old Garsworth for instance."

"Is that the squire you're talking of?" said a drawling voice at the door, and on looking towards it, the trio saw Mr. Basil Beaumont strolling into the room. Nestley grew a shade stiffer in his manner as his enemy came towards them, but Dick Pem-



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berton turned his merry face to the new comer and nodded an answer.

"Do you know him?" he asked.

Beaumont took up his favourite position in front of the fire and smoked complacently.

"Yes. When I left this place twenty-three years ago, I heard a lot about him."

"He's a miser," said Blake meditatively.

"He was when I left, and I presume he still is," replied Beaumont, "but from all I've heard, he used to be pretty gay in his youth."

"Youth," echoed Dick scornfully, "was he ever a youth?"

"I believe he was, somewhere about the Flood. Why he must be ninety now."

"Over seventy," said Blake.

"Thank you for the correction," answered Beaumont, casting a sidelong look at him; "over seventy, yes, I should say seventy-three or four, as he was about fifty

when I left; he had lived a riotous life up to the age of forty, then he suddenly took to saving money, why, nobody knows."

"Oh yes, they do," said Reginald, taking his cigar out of his mouth. "It's common gossip now."

"Tell us all about it," said Nestley, settling himself in his chair.

"It's a curious story," said Blake leisurely. "Squire Garsworth led a fast life, as Beaumont says, till he was forty, then he stumbled on some books about the transmigration of the soul."

"Pythagoras?" asked Beaumont.

"Yes, and Allan Kardec, spiritualism and reincarnation; he learned from those books to believe that his soul would be incarnated in another body; from long study of this theory he became a monomaniac."

"In one word—mad," said Beaumont.

Nestley did not want to speak either

directly or indirectly to Beaumont, but this observation appealed to his professional pride, therefore he spoke.

"Monomania does not necessarily mean madness, though it may become so; but so far as I can understand Mr. Blake, it seems to me that Squire Garsworth has made a hobby of this study, and from long concentration upon it, his hobby has become a mania; and again, the disease, as I may call it, has now assumed a more dangerous form and become monomania, which really means madness on a particular subject."

"Then it is madness," insisted Beaumont.

"In a sort of way yes," assented Nestley; "but in a general sense I would not call him mad from simply concentrating his mental power on a single subject."

"You'll call him mad when you hear all about him," said Dick grimly; "fire away Reggy."

"Mr. Garsworth," said Blake, "accepted

the doctrine of reincarnation with certain modifications. Kardec, Pythagoras and Co. believe that a newly incarnated soul is in ignorance of its previous existences, but the squire thinks that it knows all about them, consequently he believes that when his soul —at present incarnated in the Garsworth body—leaves that said body, it will become re-incarnated in another body of the same sex, and remember the time when it was the guiding intelligence of Squire Garsworth. Do I make myself clear?"

"Very clear," replied Nestley; "but if the squire believes that the soul does not lose its memory, what about his previous existences?"

"He's got a whole stock of 'em," broke in Dick quickly, "ranging from the Pharaohs down to the middle ages, but I think the Garsworth body is the first time his soul has used any fleshly envelope in our modern days."

"Curious mania," said Nestley reflectively; "if he isn't mad he's very near it."

"But what has all this incarnation humbug to do with his miserly habits?" said Beaumont impatiently, "he doesn't want to pass his existences in being miserable."

"That's the very thing," explained Reginald calmly, "it appears that in some of his previous existences he suffered from poverty, so in order to arrest such a calamity, he is saving up all his money in this existence to spend during his next incarnation."

"Oh, he's quite mad," said Nestley decisively.

"But how does he propose to get hold of the money?" said Beaumont disbelievingly; "he'll be in another body, and won't have any claim to the Garsworth estate."

"That's his secret," said Dick Pemberton, "nobody knows; queer yarn, isn't it?"

"Very," said Nestley, deeply interested. "I should like to study the case. Does he live by himself?"

"No, his cousin, Una Challoner, lives with him," interposed Blake hurriedly, the colour flushing in his face.

"Ah," thought Beaumont, noting this, "case of love, I see. I suppose Miss Challoner does not believe in his mad theories?" he added aloud.

"Hardly," said Dick contemptuously, "she's too sensible."

At this moment Job Kossiter entered the room, and, after slowly surveying the group, addressed himself to Reginald:

"If I may make so bold, Mr. Blake, sir," he said, in his thick voice, "would you ask the vicar to go to the old squire?"

"What's up?" asked Blake, rising.

"He's very ill, sir, as Munks says," said Kossiter, scratching his head, "and Doctor Bland, sir, he's ill, too, sir, and can't go, so

as there ain't a doctor to see him, I thought the vicar——"

"Not a doctor?" interposed Beaumont, quickly. "Nonsense! This gentleman," indicating Nestley, "is a doctor, so he can go at once."

"Oh, I'll go," said Nestley, rising, rather glad of the opportunity to study the case.

"Then, sir, Munks is waiting outside with the cart," observed Kossiter, moving to the door.

"Who on earth is Munks?" asked Nestley, following the landlord.

"The squire's servant," cried Dick, "and a cross-grained old ass he is."

"I don't suppose as you need tell the vicar now, sir," said Mr. Kossiter to Reginald.

"No, of course not," replied Blake, "this gentleman will do more good; it's the doctor he needs—not the clergyman."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, Reggy,"

said Dick, as they all went out. "He needs a little spiritual consolation."

"I think a straight waistcoat would be best," said Beaumont quietly, as they stood at the door, "judging from your story."

The two lads said good-night, and went homeward, while Mr. Beaumont retired into the inn, and Nestley, stepping up into the high dog-cart, drove off into the darkness of the night on his unexpected mission.

## CHAPTER IV.

### AN EXTRAORDINARY PATIENT.

Mad?
Not what the world calls madness—he is quiet;
Raves not about strange matters—curbs his tongue
With wond'rous wisdom—ponders ere he speaks,
And yet I tell you he is mad, my liege;
The moon was regnant at his birth and all
The planets bowed to her strong influence.

If Dr. Nestley had been imaginative he might have thought that he was being driven by one of the statues out of the old church, so grim and stiff was the figure beside him. Munks had a hard-featured face, and an equally hard manner, and in his suit of rough grey cloth he looked like Don Juan's Commandantore out for an airing. He devoted himself exclusively to the raw-boned animal he was driving, and replied to Dr. Nestley's questions in what

might be called a chippy manner, his answers being remarkably monosyllabic.

Was the squire ill?—very! What made him ill?—Did not know! How many people lived at the Grange?—Six! What were their names?—The squire, Miss Una, Miss Cassandra, Patience Allerby, Jellicks, and himself.

As Nestley did not find this style of conversation particularly exhilarating, he relapsed into silence, and the stony Munks devoted his attention once more to the raw-boned horse.

The dog-cart spun rapidly through the sleeping village with the dark-windowed houses on either side—over the narrow, vibrating bridge under which swept the sullen, grey river—across the wide common, where the gorse bushes looked fantastic and unreal in the moonlight, with only the silent sky overhead and the silent earth below—tall trees on either side, some

gaudy with the yellow and red of their autumnal foliage, and others gaunt and bare, their leafless branches ready for the winter snows. So still, so silent, with every now and then the sad cry of some night bird from the lonely marshes, and the steady beat of the horse's hoofs on the hard, white road. The scenery, grey and colourless under the pale light of the moon, changed with the rapidity of a kaleidoscope. First the tangled, odorous hedges that separated the road from the closely-reaped fields, afterwards a grove of beeches, casting fantastic shadows on the ground, and then, suddenly starting out of the earth as if by magic, the thick, dark wood which surrounded Garsworth Grange, as though it were the enchanted palace of the sleeping beauty. The rusty iron gates were wide open, and they drove into the park between the tall white posts with the leopards sejant thereon—up the,

broad, winding avenue with the trees tossing their leafless branches in the chill wind—while here and there at intervals the cloudy white forms of statues appeared indistinctly. The wheels crunched the dead leaves that thickly carpeted the path —a wide sweep of the avenue, and then a low, broad terrace of white stone, to which a flight of shallow steps led up through urns and statues to Garsworth Grange.

Nestley had no time to take any note of the architectural beauties of the place; for, hastily alighting, he ran up the steps, while Munks, still grimly silent, drove off, presumably in the direction of the stables. So here, Nestley found himself alone in this ghostly white world, with the keen wind whistling shrilly in his ears, and before him a monstrous, many-pillared porch with a massive door scrolled grotesquely with ironwork, like the entrance

to a family mausoleum. Whilst he was searching for a bell to ring or a knocker to knock with, the door slowly swung open with a surly creak, and a tall, slim figure, holding a flickering candle, appeared.

Was it one of the cold, white statues in the lonely garden that had by some miracle awoke to life?—this sudden vision of lovely, breathing womanhood standing out from the darkness amid a faint halo of tremulous light, the rose-flushed face with its perfectly-chiselled features delicately distinct under the coronet of pale, golden hair, one slender arm raised aloft, holding the faintly-glimmering candle, one eloquent finger placed warningly upon the full red lips, while the supple body, clad in a loose white dress, was bent forward in a graceful poise. Not Aphrodite, this midnight goddess, for the face was too pure and childlike for that of the divine coquette: not Hera in the imperial voluptuousness of

undying beauty; but Hebe, bright, girlish Hebe, with the smile of eternal youth on her lips, and the vague innocence of maidenhood shining in her dreamy eyes.

The goddess evidently expected to see the familiar face of the village doctor; for she started back in astonishment when she beheld a stranger, and seemed to demand an explanation of his visit. This he speedily furnished.

"Doctor Bland is ill, I understand," he said, politely; "but I am a medical man staying at the inn, and as the case seemed urgent, I came in his place."

The goddess smiled, and her frigid manner thawed rapidly.

"It's very kind of you, Doctor—Doctor——"

"Nestley," said that gentleman, "Doctor Nestley."

"It's very kind of you, Doctor Nestley," she said, in a musical voice, "and,

indeed, the case *is* very urgent—please come in."

Nestley stepped inside, and the young lady, closing the heavy door, secured the innumerable fastenings. Catching Nestley's eye, as he looked on, rather puzzled, at the multiplicity of bolts and chains, she laughed quietly.

"My cousin is very much afraid of thieves," she remarked, as she turned round, "he wouldn't rest in his bed if he didn't think the front door was locked—by the way, I must introduce myself—Una Challoner!"

"I have heard of you, Miss Challoner," said Nestley, looking at her in admiration.

"From whom?" she asked, quickly.

"Mr. Blake and Mr. Pemberton."

She flushed a little, and bowed with some hauteur.

"Will you come upstairs with me, Doctor," she said, turning away from him.

Dr. Nestley was about to follow, when his attention was arrested by the unexpected apparition of a small, stout lady, by no means young, who was, nevertheless, arrayed in a juvenile-looking gown of pink with the remarkable addition of a tea-cosy perched on her head, which gave her the appearance of being half extinguished. She also held a candle and stood in front of the doctor, smirking and smiling coquettishly.

"Introduce me, Una, dearest," she cried, in a thin, piping voice which seemed ridiculous, coming from such a stout person. "I'm so fond of doctors. Most people aren't—but then I'm odd."

She certainly was, both in appearance and manner; but, Una being used to her eccentricities, evinced no surprise, but, looking down on the grotesque figure from her tall height, smiled gravely.

"Doctor Nestley, this is my aunt, Miss

Cassandra Challoner," she said, in a soft voice.

Miss Cassandra shook her girlish head and made an odd little bow, to which the doctor politely responded, then suddenly recollecting the tea-cosy, snatched it off with an apologetic giggle, thereby displaying a head of frizzy yellow hair.

"Draughty house," she said, in explanation of her peculiar head-dress. "I get neuralgia pains down the side of my nose and in my left eye. I'm sure it's the left, doctor. Very odd, isn't it? I wear the tea-cosy to keep the heat in my head. Heat is good for the nerves, but you know all about that, being a doctor. How very odd. I mean, it isn't odd, is it?"

How long she would have rambled on in this aimless fashion it is impossible to say, but, fortunately, a third woman, bearing a candle, appeared descending the stairs,

which put an end to Miss Cassandra's chatter.

"It's Jellicks," said Miss Challoner quickly, "the squire must be worse."

Jellicks was an ugly old woman of about sixty, with a withered, wrinkled face, rough, greyish hair, and a peculiar kind of wriggling movement, something like that of a dog who has done wrong and wants to curry favour with his angry master. She wriggled down the stairs, writhed up to Una, and, with a final wriggle, delivered her message in one word and a whisper.

"Wuss!" she hissed out in a low, sibillant manner.

Dr. Nestley was beginning to feel bewildered with the strangeness of his position. This cold, vault-like hall with its high roof, tesselated black and white diamond pavement, massive figures in suits of armour on either side, seemed to chill his blood, and the three candles held by the three women

danced before his eyes like will-o'-the-wisps. A musty odour permeated the atmosphere, and the flickering lights, which only served to show the darkness, assumed to his distorted imagination the semblance of corpse candles. Shaking off this feeling with an effort, he turned to Miss Challoner.

"I think I had better go up at once," he said in a loud, cheerful voice. "Every moment is precious."

Miss Challoner bowed in silence, and preceded him up the stairs, followed by the wriggling Jellicks and the girlish Miss Cassandra, who declined to be left behind.

"No; positively no," she whimpered, shaking her candle and replacing the cosy on her head. "It's like a tomb — the 'Mistletoe Bough,' you know—very odd—he might die—his spirit and all that sort of thing — nerves, doctor, nothing else — chronic; mother's side—dear, dear. I feel like a haunted person in what's-his-name's

book? Dickens. Charming, isn't he? So odd."

And, indeed, there was a ghostly flavour about the whole place as they walked slowly up the wide stairs, with the darkness closing densely around them. Every footfall seemed to awake an echo, and the painted faces of the old Garsworths frowned and smiled grotesquely on them from the walls as they moved silently along.

A wide corridor, another short flight of stairs, and then a heavy door, underneath which could be seen a thin streak of light. Pausing here, Una opened it, and the four passed into Squire Garsworth's bedroom, which struck the doctor as being almost as chill and ghostly as the hall.

It was a large room with no carpet on the polished floor, hardly any furniture and no lights, save at the further end, where a candle, standing on a small round table, feebly illuminated a huge curtained

bed set on a small square of carpet on which were also the round table aforesaid and two heavy chairs, the whole forming a kind of dismal oasis in the desert of bare floor.

On the bed lay the squire, an attenuated old man with a face looking as though it were carved out of old ivory, fierce black eyes and scanty white hair flowing from under a black velvet skull cap. A multiplicity of clothes were heaped on the bed to keep him warm, and his thin arms and claw-like hands were outside the blankets plucking restlessly at the counterpane. Beside him stood a woman in a slate-coloured dress, with an expressionless white face and smooth black hair, drawn back over her finely shaped head. She kept her eyes on the floor and her hands folded in front of her, but, on hearing a strange footstep, turned to look at the doctor. A strangely mournful face it was,

as if the shadow of a great sorrow had fallen across it and would never more be lifted. Nestley guessed this to be Patience Allerby, so the number of the extraordinary individuals who occupied Garsworth Grange was now complete.

Hearing the doctor enter, Squire Garsworth, with the suspicious celerity of a sick man, raised himself on his elbow and peered malevolently into the darkness, looking like some evil magician of olden time.

"Who is there?" he asked in a querulous voice, "someone to rob me; thieves and rogues—all—all rogues and thieves."

"It is the doctor," said Una, coming close to him.

"What does he bring? what does he bring?" asked the sick man, eagerly, "life or death? Tell me, quick."

"I cannot tell you till I ask a few

questions," said Nestley, stepping into the radius of light.

"Ha!" cried Garsworth, with sudden suspicion, "not Bland. No; a stranger. What do you want? Where is Bland?"

"He is ill," said Nestley, distinctly, coming close to him, "and cannot come, but I am a doctor and will do as well."

The old man looked at him anxiously, seeming to devour him with the fierce intensity of his gaze.

"Weak," he muttered, after a pause, "very weak, still there is intellect in the face."

Then he suddenly put out his hand and grasped that of Nestley in his thin, claw-like fingers.

"I will trust you," he said rapidly. "You are weak, but honest. Save my life, and I will pay you well."

"I will do what I can," replied Nestley simply.

The squire, with an effort, sat up in bed, and waved his hand imperatively.

"Turn them all out," he said sharply, pointing to the women. "I must tell you what I won't tell them. A physician is more of a confessor than a priest. Go away and leave me with my confessor."

Nestley was about to remonstrate, but Una placed her finger on her lips, and all three women noiselessly withdrew, bearing their candles. When the door closed after them the immense room was quite in darkness, save for the feeble glimmer of the taper by the bed, which shed its light on the pallid countenance of the old man now lying back exhausted on his pillows. It was certainly a very strange situation, and Nestley, modern physician though he was, felt little thrills of superstitious awe running through him. He was about to speak when the squire, turning on his side,

looked at him earnestly and commenced to talk.

"I do not want you to diagnose my case," he said, in a low, feverish voice. "I can tell you all about it. Your task is to supply remedies. I am an old man, seventy-five years of age. It's a long life, but not long enough for what I want. The sword has worn out the scabbard—my soul is encased in a worn-out body and I want you to sustain the vital forces of the body. I can look after the soul; you mind the body."

"I understand perfectly," observed Nestley, feeling his pulse. "Nerve exhaustion."

"Aha! yes, that is it. I have been working too hard and overtaxed my nerves. You must restore them to their normal state. Tonics, electricity, rest—what you will, but give me back my vital powers in their pristine vigour."

"It is impossible to do that," said Nestley, quickly, "you are not young, remember, but I will give you some medicine that will replace the wasted tissues and afford you relief, if not health; but you will never be strong again."

"Not in this body," exclaimed Garsworth, raising himself on his elbow, "no, but in my next incarnation I shall be—ah, you look surprised, but you, no doubt, have heard of the mad squire. Mad! Poor fools, my madness is their sanity. I shall be young and vigorous in my next body, and I shall be rich. All this life I have been working for the next, but I have not gained enough money. No, not half enough. Make me well again, that I can complete my work, then I will gladly leave this worn-out body for a new one. I will pay you—oh yes—I will pay you."

He fell back exhausted on the pillows,

worn out by the rapidity of his speech, and Nestley called out loudly for assistance. Patience Allerby entered the room, and, by the doctor's orders brought some wine in a glass. This Nestley held to the sick man's lips, while the housekeeper, at the other side of the bed, held the candle for him to see by. The wine infused a fictitious life into the old man, and seeing he was easier, Nestley determined to go back to Garsworth in order to get some medicine.

He put the clothes over the squire and bent down to speak.

"You must lie quiet," he said, in a slow voice, "and take some wine whenever you feel exhausted. I will send you a sedative to-night, and to-morrow morning will call and see you."

The sick man, too exhausted to speak, made a motion with his hand to show he understood, and lay back white and still,

in complete contrast to his former restlessness. Nestley saw that the effort had fatigued him greatly, and was the more anxious to give him some soothing draught, as every paroxysm of excitement exhausted the nerves and rendered him weaker. But even in his anxiety, as he looked at him lying so still with the candles on either side of the bed, he could not help comparing him, in his own mind, to a corpse laid out preparatory to burial. The thought was a horrible one, but the atmosphere of the house seemed to engender horrible thoughts, so he hurried to the door, anxious to leave this nightmare castle.

Patience Allerby, soft-footed and silent, lighted him downstairs, and having seen him safe in the hall turned back without a word.

"A strange woman," thought Nestley, looking after her, "and a strange house;"

then he turned to Una and Miss Cassey, who were anxiously waiting his report.

"I have given him a little wine," he said, putting on his gloves. "Keep him as quiet as possible and I'll send some sedative from Garsworth; he is in a very exhausted condition and must be kept quiet. How can I send the medicine?"

"Munks will bring it when he drives you in," said Una quickly. "You will come again?"

"Yes, to-morrow morning," he replied as she opened the door, and was about to depart when Miss Cassey arrested him.

"I'll take some of the medicine myself, doctor," she said. "I'm so easily upset—nerves again—it's in the family; come and prescribe for me to-morrow—I'm so odd, I think it's the house—lonely, you know—bromide is good, isn't it? Yes, Doctor Pecks, in London, told me so. Do you know him?—No—how odd—clever on

nerves—my nerves—don't forget to-morrow —good-night — charming moon — yes—so odd."

After hearing this incoherent speech, Dr. Nestley managed to get away, and saying good-night to Una, went down the steps. The dog-cart was waiting for him, and Munks, the Mute, drove him back grimly the whole way. It was quite a relief getting into the cool fresh air, and Nestley half thought the lonely house and its fantastic occupants were phantoms, so unreal did they seem.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE FAMILY CIRCLE.

But turning from these scenes of beauty rare,
The family circle next demands our care,
That fireside kingdom where the father bland
His sceptre sways with firm and gentle hand.
Obedient children clust'ring round his knees
Perform with pleasure all his mild decrees,
With willing hearts upon his orders wait,
Thus show example to the parent state.

Dr. Larcher, the vicar of Garsworth, was a fine type of what is called muscular Christianity. Tall, broad-shouldered and burly, he looked more like a cavalry officer than a parson, and he preached his sermons, which were generally plain and outspoken, in a loud, assertive tone of voice. Being fond of archæology and long walks, he knew every inch of the country for miles round, and was as well

acquainted with the poorest cottagers as with the lords of the soil. Simple, large-minded gentleman that he was, he admirably suited his position in life, and if the rustics of Garsworth had not a sound belief in the tenets of the Church of England, it was by no means the fault of the worthy vicar, who thundered out practical Christianity in ponderous Johnsonian sentences, with the zeal of a Savonarola and the eloquence of a Bossuet. He was also a great Latinist, and plentifully seasoned his discourse with quotations from Horace, for which bard he professed great admiration.

On the morning after the visit of Nestley to the Grange, Dr. Larcher was seated at the breakfast-table talking eagerly about a bronze sword which had just been brought to him, having been disinterred from some ancient British tumulus. His present congregation consisted of Dick Pemberton,

who was rather disposed to laugh at the important discovery, Reginald Blake, looking somewhat preoccupied, Ferdinand Priggs, the poet, a sallow youth with dreamy eyes and a deep voice, and Miss Eleonora Gwendoline Vera Bianca Larcher, the sole child of the vicar and his wife.

These names, decidedly alarming ones, had been given to her by Mrs. Larcher, who had selected them from the "Family Herald," her favourite journal, but Dr. Larcher, who had no fancy for high-sounding titles, called his daughter Pumpkin. This unhappy cognomen had been bestowed on the child by the nurse, in despair at being unable to master the legitimate names, and the vicar was so pleased with the oddity of the title that he there and then adopted it. Mrs. Larcher, however, obstinately refused to accept this innovation, and called her daughter Eleonora Gwendoline, but gener-

ally Miss Larcher answered to the name of Pumpkin, her aristocratic names being only brought out on company occasions.

She was a pretty, plump girl, with dark eyes and a rosy face. Endowed with a large amount of common sense, her tastes lay in the direction of making puddings and mending clothes, whilst she evinced a great contempt for poetry and such-like things. Mrs. Larcher, being an invalid, left the management of the house entirely to Pumpkin, who ruled the servants with a rod of iron, looked after the creature comforts of her father and his pupils, and was besides a bright, lively girl whom everyone adored.

As to Mrs. Larcher, she was always ill, but why she should be so was a mystery to everyone save herself. It was either her nerves or her liver or her spine or her laziness—most probably the latter, as she mostly passed her life alternating between

the sofa and her bed. Occasionally she strolled out, but always came back feeling weak and bad, to be strengthened with strong tea and hot muffins, after which she would bewail her delicate constitution in a subdued whimper. Her unknown malady was known to all as "The Affliction," that being a generic name for all kinds of diseases, and Mrs. Larcher herself alluded to her ill-health by this title as being a happy one and necessitating no special mention of any one infirmity. Pumpkin looked after everything and was the good fairy of the vicarage, while Mrs. Larcher lay all day on her sofa reading novels and drinking tea, or gossiping with any visitors who might drop in.

At present Mrs. Larcher was safe in bed upstairs, and Pumpkin presided at the breakfast-table, which was now covered with an array of empty dishes, as the male portion of the vicarage inmates, with the

exception of the poet, had large appetites. Dr. Larcher, however, had been too excited to eat much, and had his eyes intently fixed upon his newly-discovered bronze implement.

"It's a wonderful example of what the ancient Britons could do," he said grandiloquently, "and to my mind, proves no mean standard of civilisation.

"Even in that age of barbarism," observed the poet enthusiastically, "they cultivated a love for the beautiful."

"Oh, bosh!" said Dick irreverently: "they wanted something to knock the stuffing out of an enemy."

"Well, I think that sword could do it," remarked Pumpkin, with a smile. "Suppose we try it on you, Dick."

"No, thanks," retorted that young gentleman, grimacing. "I'll agree without practical proof."

"I shall write an article on this," said

Dr. Larcher, delicately balancing the sword in his hand. "Such a discovery will be a distinct gain to our knowledge of the aborigines of that dead and buried time of so long ago—*Eheu fugaces! Postume labuntur anni.*"

"It breathes the very spirit of the age," cried Ferdinand, with an inspired air:

> "The age of Bronze, the age of Bronze
> Where Boadicea——"

"Loved and sung," finished Dick. "I say, old chap, you're cribbing from the 'Isles of Greece.'"

Whereupon Ferdinand entered into a lively discussion with Dick to prove that he had not plagiarised from Byron, while Dick, in reply, mercilessly chaffed the unhappy poet with such success that he fled from the room, pursued by his laughing antagonist.

"What is the matter, Reggy?" asked Pumpkin, seeing how quiet Blake had remained; "anything wrong?"

"Oh no," he replied hastily, "but I was wondering how the Squire is this morning."

"You had better go over and see, Blake," said the vicar, looking up. "I hope that strange doctor did him some good. By the way, who is this doctor?"

"I don't know, sir," answered Blake, turning towards Dr. Larcher. "He said he was on a walking tour, and I fancy is a friend of Beaumont's."

The vicar frowned.

"Birds of a feather," he said decisively. "I don't think much of Beaumont, Blake, and if this Dr. Nestley is his friend, I'm afraid he's not much good."

"That is severe, papa," said Pumpkin.

"My dear," replied her father, em-

phatically, "I hope I am the last man in the world to speak ill of my fellow creatures, but I am afraid that Basil Beaumont is not a good man—you can hardly call him '*integer vitæ*,'—I knew him before he left the parish, and even then his nature was not all that could be desired; but now his worst traits of character have been developed in the pernicious atmosphere of London life, and as I am the guardian of three youths whose minds are naturally open to seductive influences, it is but right that I should take a severe view of the matter; if Basil Beaumont became the companion of my pupils, I should tremble for the result—*ille dies utramque ducet ruinam*."

"But Dr. Nestley, papa?"

"As to Dr. Nestley," said the vicar majestically, "I do not yet know him—when I do, I will be in a position to judge of his character—but like draws

to like, and I fear—I fear sadly," finished Dr. Larcher, shaking his head sagaciously, "that no one of strictly upright principles can be an intimate friend of Basil Beaumont's."

"I don't think they are very intimate friends," said Reggy thoughtfully, "rather the opposite."

"Ah, indeed," replied Dr. Larcher, "well, well, we shall see; however—*non haec jocosæ conveniunt lyræ*—you can go over to the Grange, Blake, and inquire after the Squire's health."

At this moment a tapping was heard on the floor above, which signified that Mrs. Larcher required some little attention, whereupon Pumpkin left the room with alacrity, in order to see what "The Affliction" wanted. Left alone with the vicar, Reggy was about to retire, when Dr. Larcher stopped him.

"By the way, Blake," he said gravely,

"I wish to speak to you on a serious subject."

Reggy flushed red and bowed, without saying a word, as he intuitively guessed what was coming.

"I am aware," observed the vicar, in his ponderous manner, "that I may be about to interfere in your affairs in what you may consider a most unjustifiable manner."

"Not at all, sir," answered Reginald warmly, "no one has such a right to speak to me as you have—my second father—I may say my only father."

Dr. Larcher smiled in a gratified manner, and looked at the tall young man standing near him with approval.

"I am glad to have your good opinion," he said, politely bending his head, "but in order that you may understand me clearly, you must permit me to recapitulate as shortly as possible the story of

your life; this is a very critical period of your career—remember Horace, *Tu nisi ventis debis ludibrium cave.*

Blake turned pale, then, with a forced smile, resumed his seat, and waited for the vicar to proceed, which that worthy gentleman did, not without some embarrassment.

"Of course you understand," he said, clearing his throat, "that I am quite unaware of your parentage—whether your mother and father are alive I do not know—about two-and-twenty years ago you were brought to me by Patience Allerby, your nurse, who had just then returned from London, where she had been in service. She told me that you were the son of a poor literary man, and his wife, whose servant she had been; they went away to France, and—I understand—died there. She was left with you on her hands, so brought you down here, and delivered you

to my charge; since then you have been an inmate of my house."

"The only home I ever knew," interposed Blake, with emotion.

"I will not deny," said Dr. Larcher, "that I have received through your nurse certain sums of money for your education, which leads me to believe—in spite of her denial that your parents may be still alive. This is well enough in the past, but now you are twenty-two years of age, and I wish to make some arrangements about your future career—you will of course choose your own vocation in life—but meanwhile I wish you to ask Patience Allerby about your birth, and obtain from her all information regarding your parents which may be of use to me—you can do so when you go over to the Grange to-day—and then let me know the result; afterwards we can discuss ways and means regarding your future."

"It's very kind of you, sir, to talk like this" said Blake, in a low voice, "and I feel deeply grateful to you. I will see Patience, and get her to tell me all she knows, but I'm afraid I can expect nothing from my parents, even though they are alive — a father and mother who could leave their child to the mercy of strangers all these years cannot have much humanity."

"Do not judge them too harshly," said the vicar hastily, "there may be reasons."

"I have no doubt of that," replied Blake bitterly, "reasons which mean shame."

"Not necessarily — a secret marriage ——"

"Would have been declared long before the lapse of twenty years," said Reggy quickly. "I'm afraid there is worse than that, and my birth was my mother's shame."

There was a cloud on the good vicar's brow as the young man spoke, but he delicately refrained from saying anything. Going over to Blake, he patted him gently on the shoulder, a mark of kindliness which touched the young man deeply.

"Come! come, Blake," he said cheerfully, "you must not cherish these morbid fancies. You are young and clever, with the world before you, who knows but what you may achieve success, and then your unknown parents, if they live, will acknowledge you only too gladly. Do not be so easily cast down. What is the manly advice of the Venusinian?

> 'Rebus angustis animosus atque
> Fortis appare.'"

"I don't think Horace was ever called upon to bear trouble undaunted," said Blake rather sadly, "but if my belief be true, it will cast a shadow on my life."

"Morbid! morbid!" replied the vicar gaily, "do not go out in a coach and four to meet your troubles, my lad—see Patience first—if your thoughts prove correct there will be time enough to lament them, but with youth and brains on your side you should not turn recreant in the battle of life."

"Nor will I," said Reggy, grasping the kind hand held out towards him. "Whatever comes or goes I have at least one man who has been to me father and mother both."

Then, overcome by his emotion, he hastily left the room, while the vicar, taking up the bronze sword, prepared to follow.

"Ah!" said the worthy gentleman with a sigh. "I trust his forebodings may not prove true, but Patience Allerby knows more than she tells, and I fear for the worst; however, *Non si male nunc et olim*

*sic erit*, and the boy has at least had a few happy years — what says glorious John?

> 'Not heaven itself over the past hath power
> For what hath been hath been,
> And I have had my hour.'"

And with this somewhat Pagan sentiment Dr. Larcher went off to discuss the Bronze period, illustrated by the newly-found sword, with a certain old crony who always differed from him, and constantly said "No" to the vicar's "Yes."

## CHAPTER VI.

### A MORNING WALK.

A snake you were in other days
  Ere you attained the human state:
Still in your veins the snake blood plays
  Which leads you now to gloze and hate,
The magic of the serpent gaze
  Lurks in your eyes to fascinate.

As it was a holiday the pupils were left to their own devices, and on going outside, Blake found Dick Pemberton amusing himself with Muffins and a fishing rod. Ferdinand having been worsted by the volatile Dick, had long since departed to work at a tragedy he was composing, and Mr. Pemberton was evidently getting ready for a fishing excursion in company with Muffins.

"Now what do you think you are

doing?" asked Reggy, pausing at the door.

"None so blind as those who won't see," retorted Dick, coolly. "I'm goin' fishin'."

"Fishing?" repeated Reggy, with emphasis.

"With the accent on the 'G'," replied Richard, gaily. "Don't be a pedant, old chap—fishin' means the same thing as fishing, and not so much trouble to say. I suppose I ought to call Muffins 'Muffings.'"

"Oh, bosh! retorted Reggy, politely, walking down to the gate.

"Quite right—it is bosh, oh King. Where are you off to?"

"Grange?"

Dick arched his eyebrows, shook his head, and whistled, at which Reginald flushed a little.

"What do you mean?" he asked, turning round.

"Nothin' nothin,' said Dick, demurely; "you're 'goin' a-courtin', sir, she said,' I suppose."

"What nonsense, Dick," said Blake, angrily, "as if Una——"

"Oh! ho!" replied Pemberton; "sits the wind in that quarter? I never mentioned the lady's name. You ought to get our one and only poet to write you some verses—

> 'Oh, I could spoon a
> Girl like dear Una
> Aileen Aroona,'

—bad poetry, but beautiful sentiment."

"I wish you'd be serious, Dick," said Reginald, in a vexed tone; I am only going over to the Grange to ask after the Squire's health."

"All right," replied Dick good-naturedly; "give old Cassy my love, and tell her I'm going to propose to her—odd, isn't it?—so very odd." And with a capital imitation

of Miss Cassandra's fidgetty manner, he walked away followed by Muffins, while Reginald went out of the gate on to the village street.

The interview with Dr. Larcher had touched him more nearly than he liked to confess even to himself, and his frivolous conversation with Dick had been somewhat of a relief to him, but now, being alone, he relapsed into sombre thoughts. He was dissatisfied with his position, and longed to know more about himself—who were his parents?—were they dead or alive?—why was he thrust into the world as an outcast? The only person who could explain the mystery of his life was Patience Allerby; he determined, therefore, to apply to her for the explanation.

Filled with these dismal thoughts, he sauntered slowly up the street as far as the bridge. Here he paused, and leaning over the parapet, began to think again. It was

a curious thing that this young man, brought up in a quiet, Christian household, should let his thoughts run on such a morbid idea as the possibility of his being a natural son. He had no experience of vice, and should therefore have accepted the marriage of his unknown parents as a fact, especially when his nurse asserted that they had been married. But the strangeness of his position led him to believe that there must be some motive for concealment, and this motive, he determined in his own mind, was the want of a marriage certificate.

The real cause, however, which led to this morbid analysis of the possible relations between his parents, lay in a discovery which he had lately made—a discovery which changed the simple manly life he was leading into a raging hell of doubts and self-torturings.

He was in love—and Una Challoner was

the woman he loved. It was not that sickly evanescent affection common to adolescence, known by the name of calf love—no; but that strong overwhelming passion of the soul which has no limits and which dominates and sways the whole nature. Drawn in the first place towards Una by simple admiration of her beauty, he learned later on to discard this soulless passion, and found in the kindred sympathy of her spirit with his own that ideal union which so rarely exists. She, on her part, had been attracted to him by the same qualities which he found in her, and this perfect agreement developed in each a pure and spiritual adoration.

His love thus being pure, he would not dare to offer her anything but purity, and anxiously began to examine his life in order to discover all flaws which marred its whiteness. He was not an ideal young man, still he discovered nothing in his life

which would embarrass him to explain, so felt quite easy in himself, but now this shadow of possible illegitimacy seemed to threaten disaster. He would not dare to offer to the woman he loved and respected a name which was not legally his own.

However, it was no use indulging in self-torture when it could be ended by getting a proper explanation of the circumstances of his birth from Patience Allerby. Hitherto he had shrunk from doing this with the vague hesitation of a man who dreads to hear the truth, but now it was imperative he should learn all, be it good or evil, and shape his course accordingly. At this moment of his life he stood at the junction of two roads, and the explanation of Patience Allerby would decide which one he was to take. Having come to this logical conclusion, he resolutely banished all dismal thoughts from his mind, and walked rapidly across the common in the

direction of Garsworth Grange. It was the quest, not for El Dorado or the Holy Grail, but for the secret which would make or mar his whole life.

Dull and heavy was the day, with a cold grey sky overhead, a humid wind blowing chill with the moisture of the fens, and a sense of decay in the atmosphere. The gaunt, bare trees with their slender branches and twigs outlined with delicate distinctness against the sad grey sky—the withered leaves with their vivid reds and yellows which carpeted the ground—the absence of song of bird, or cheerful lowing of kine—all weighed down and depressed his spirits. The uniform tints of the landscape with its absence of colour and life seemed like a type of his own existence at present; but lo, when he raised his eyes a golden shaft of sunlight was above the distant towers of the Grange, where he hoped to find the talisman which would

change the grey monotony of an uneventful past to the glory and joy of a happy future. It was an omen of success, and his eyes brightened, his step grew springy, and he clutched his stick with determination as he strode towards the glory of the sun, leaving the grey mists and desolate landscape behind him.

As he walked on he saw a short distance ahead the tall figure of a man, and on coming abreast of him he recognised Basil Beaumont, who was listlessly strolling along, thinking deeply. Remembering the vicar's dislike to the character of Beaumont, he was about to pass on with a conventional nod, when the artist spoke, and he could not with courtesy refuse to answer.

"Good morning, Blake," he said in a friendly tone. "Taking a constitutional?"

"Not exactly," replied Reginald, falling into the leisurely walk of the artist; "the

vicar wants to know how Squire Garsworth is?"

"Had I met you earlier I could have saved you the walk," said Beaumont indolently; "he is much better—they sent to Nestley this morning to tell him about it."

"Where is Dr. Nestley now?" asked Blake.

Beaumont pointed to the Grange with his stick.

"Over there," he answered, "seeing his patient. I expect he'll have to remain down here for some time—the Squire has taken a great fancy to him—rich men's likings are poor men's fortunes."

"Good. I wish someone would take a liking to me," said Blake with a sigh. "I need a fortune."

"You've got one."

"Indeed! Where?"

"In your throat!"

Reginald laughed and shook his head.

"I hardly think that," he answered gaily.

"Don't be so mock modest, my dear boy," said Beaumont with a shrug. "I assure you I'm not one to praise unnecessarily. You need training, severe training, to bring your voice to perfection; but you've got a wonderful organ to work on — not that voice is everything, mind you; I've known people with good voices to whom such a gift is absolutely worthless."

"Why?"

"Because they have no talent. To make a singer needs more than voice—it needs great perseverance, powerful dramatic instinct, an educated mind, and a strong individuality."

"I don't think I've got all that," said Reggy rather disconsolately.

"Let me see," observed Beaumont deliberately, "you've a good voice and dramatic instinct, as I know from the way you sang

that song last night—you are educated, of course, and I can see for myself you have an individuality of your own—there only remains perseverance. Have you perseverance?"

"I think so."

"Ah! doubtful. I'll put the question in another way. Are you ambitious? If you are, you must have perseverance—one is the natural outcome of the other."

"How so?"

"Logically in this way—an ambitious man wants to succeed—he can't succeed without perseverance—*ergo*, he perseveres to succeed in his ambition. Now then, are you persevering or ambitious?"

"I'm not sure."

"No!" Beaumont did not seem disappointed at this reply, but went on talking. "Then you have no incentive; you are in the chrysalis stage; get an incentive, and you will change to a butterfly."

"What incentive can I obtain?"

"That depends upon your temperament —the desire to leave this dull village— the desire to have money, and above all, the desire to be loved by some woman."

"Ah," said Blake, whom this last remark stung sharply, "at least I have that incentive."

Beaumont laughed.

"Then the result must follow, you will persevere and succeed."

Blake was much impressed with Beaumont's remarks, for a vision rose before him of a bright future and a famous name with Una for his wife. Then the recollection of the dark secret of his birth came back to him; if what he surmised were true, he would have nothing to work for, as there would be an insuperable bar between him and the girl he loved. The roseate scenes he had conjured up vanished, and in their

place he only saw the sorrow of a lonely life. He sighed involuntarily, and shook his head.

"It all depends on one thing," he said sadly.

"And that one thing?" asked Beaumont keenly.

"Is at present a secret," replied Blake curtly, whereupon Beaumont laughed lightly, in no wise offended, and they walked on for a short distance in silence.

They were now nearing the Grange, and Beaumont was going to turn back when he saw Nestley coming down the road.

"Here is Nestley," he said carelessly, "so you can learn all about the Squire from him, and need not go to the Grange."

"I must go to the Grange," replied Blake.

Beaumont smiled and whistled the air of "Love's Young Dream," for he had heard

rumours in the village which led him to believe that Blake was in love with the Squire's beautiful cousin.

Reginald understood him, and was about to make some angry remark, when Nestley came up to them and put an end to the conversation.

"Well, doctor," said Beaumont lightly, "and how is your patient?"

Nestley's face wore a frown as he recognised Beaumont, but he evidently determined not to give his enemy the pleasure of seeing his annoyance, so smoothing his features to a bland smile, he replied in the same conversational manner:

"Better—much better—he'll be all right soon—less excitable—but the body is worn out."

"And the brain?" asked the artist.

"Oh, that's all right—he has a wonderful brain."

"Slightly cracked," interposed Blake, nodding to Nestley.

"Just slightly," replied Nestley, coolly. "But his madness has a good deal of method in it. He's got queer ideas about the re-incarnation of the soul—but we've all queer ideas more or less."

"Particularly more," observed Beaumont, indolently. "Are you coming back, Nestley? I'll be glad of a companion."

Nestley hesitated. He did not like Beaumont, and mistrusted him. Still, there was a wonderful fascination about the man which few could resist, and in spite of his dislike Nestley rapidly found himself falling once more under the old spell of that suave, cynical manner.

"I don't mind," he said, carelessly, "particularly as I want to give you a message from the Squire."

"To me?" said Beaumont in surprise. "What about?"

"A picture. The Squire wants his portrait taken, and——"

"You thought of me," said Beaumont, with a cold smile; "how charming you are, my dear Nestley. I'll be delighted to paint the Squire, he's a Rembrandtian study, full of light and shade and wrinkles."

"Where are you going to, Mr. Blake?" asked Nestley, abruptly turning to the young man and eyeing him keenly.

"To the Grange," replied Blake carelessly, "to see the Squire. Good morning, gentlemen," and with a cool nod, the young man strolled away in the direction of Garsworth Grange.

Nestley stood looking after him oddly.

"To see the Squire," he repeated. "Yes and Una Challoner."

"Ah," said Beaumont cynically. "You've seen that, my dear fellow."

"Yes. Do you know Una Challoner loves him?"

"Not exactly. I know he loves Una Challoner."

"She returns his love," said Nestley gloomily, "I found that out from her manner this morning."

Beaumont smiled and looked strangely at the downcast face of the doctor.

"I understand," he said, lighting a fresh cigarette.

"Understand what?" asked Nestley angrily.

"That you also love Una Challoner."

"Absurd, I've only seen her twice."

"Nevertheless——"

"What?"

"Oh nothing, nothing," replied Beaumont airily. "I'll tell you all about it in a week."

Nestley did not reply, but stood silently looking at the ground, on seeing which, Beaumont drew his arm within his own, with a gay laugh.

"Come along," he said cheerfully, "we'll walk back to Garsworth, and you can tell me all about the Squire and his picture."

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE HOUSEKEEPER.

Like a lone mountain white with virgin snow,
Which holds within its breast eternal fire,
This woman cold and pale with face of woe
Yet feels at heart an unappeased desire.

Reginald Blake walked briskly up the avenue. It had an excessively dreary appearance, for the black looking trees with their angular branches seemed starved and attenuated while the leaves underfoot were sodden with rain. The marble statues which were standing here and there, wore a disconsolate look, as if they longed for the sunny skies of their native Italy, and mutely protested against this misty climate which discoloured and marred their beauty.

When he arrived at the terrace, the long, white façade of the house seemed grim and uninviting. No smoke ascended from the slender chimneys, no face appeared at the bare staring windows, and the terrace, which should have been thronged with gay company, was silent and deserted, chilling the very soul with its mute sense of desolation.

The young man rang the bell in the monstrous porch, and before the harsh jangling had ceased to echo through the dreary house, the door was opened by Jellicks. On recognising Blake, she wriggled a welcome and admitted him into the vault-like hall which still retained the musty smell observed by Nestley. Outside the grey sky, inside the grey twilight, it seemed as though the sun had not warmed this dismal place with his cheerful beams for centuries.

"I want to see Miss Challoner," said

Reginald, when the heavy door was once more closed, "is she at home?"

Jellicks replied that she was, in a serpent like hiss, and then, still more like a serpent, she wriggled along the dark corridor on the ground floor followed by Blake, who felt depressed by the surrounding atmosphere of decay.

At length she stopped midway in the passage and on knocking at a door was bidden by a thin voice, seemingly that of Miss Cassy, to enter.

Reginald did so, and Jellicks having twisted herself apologetically out of the room, he stepped forward to greet Una and Cassandra, who were seated in the wide window looking out on to the white terrace and dreary landscape.

Una, flushed with life and beauty, seemed somewhat out of place in this charnel house though, truth to tell, the room had a more homelike appearance than the rest

of the Grange. Not very large, panelled with carved oak, dark and solemn-looking, it was hung round with pictures in tarnished gilt frames, the floor being covered with a comfortable-looking carpet of reddish tint. In the huge fireplace burned a goodly fire, which somewhat warmed the chill atmosphere. The furniture was quaint and old-fashioned, of all dates, ranging from heavy oak tables of Tudor days to spindle-legged Chippendale chairs and curiously inlaid cabinets of more modern construction. There was only one window in the room, a deep oriel with benches set in its depths and its diamond panes rich with brightly tinted escutcheons of the Garsworth family. A quaint room of ancient and incongruous appearance, yet having withal a quiet beauty of its own, a tone of intense restfulness, which was not without charm.

"Good morning, Miss Challoner," said

Reginald politely, mindful of the presence of Miss Cassy. "I have called by the desire of Dr. Larcher to see how the squire is."

"Oh, better, much better," interposed Miss Cassy before Una could speak. "I said it was nerves all along—so very odd—quite excitable he was, but the dear doctor's medicine you know—so soothing, really very soothing—I don't know what the dear squire will do without the dear doctor."

"He's not going to do without him, aunt," said Una with a smile; "my cousin is afraid of getting ill again, so has asked Dr. Nestley to stay down here for a few weeks to complete the cure."

"What about his own practice?" asked Reginald.

"Oh, he says that will be all right, as he has left it in charge of his partner. Have you met Dr. Nestley?"

"Yes, at the gates; he has gone back to Garsworth with Mr. Beaumont."

"Beaumont," said Miss Cassy with vivacity, "that is the painter, very odd, isn't it? he's going to paint the dear squire's picture—how nice."

"Why does the squire want his picture painted?" inquired Blake.

Una laughed.

"Not for his beauty, at all events," she said mischievously, "but you know, there is only one picture of him in the gallery—as a young man. I presume this will be for the sake of contrast. Do you know Mr. Beaumont?"

"Slightly. He's a stranger here," replied Blake, a little coldly. "I should say he was a very clever man—but he is hardly the style I care about."

"He looks wicked," said Miss Cassy, nodding her head sagely; "worn, you know—oh, shocking!—but very handsome

—just the kind of man I would like for a son."

"Oh, aunt!" said Una, slightly shocked.

"Well, I would, Una. You know I should like to have been married—I'm sure I don't know why I haven't been married," said the poor lady, pathetically. "I'm sure anyone can see I'm not made for a spinster—it's so odd, isn't it?"

Blake, being directly appealed to, suppressed a smile, and assented politely; whereupon Miss Cassy resumed:

"It's so hard for an unmarried girl to know when to leave off being a girl—I'm sure I don't know—ivy, you know, I feel like it; I'm made to cling to a manly oak—no, I mean an oakly man—no! not that—mixed, you see! I mean a man like an oak—yes, that's it, and then I might have had twelve stalwart sons—all oaks! Strange isn't it?—most peculiar."

"My dear aunt, what curious things you

say!" said Una, looking reproachfully at Reggy, who was trying to smother his laughter.

"Yes, I know, dear," replied Miss Cassy, complacently, "we're all odd—nerves—quite chronic; anyone can see that it comes of being an ivy—I mean a woman—so very nice—yes, I always say so—don't you, Mr. Blake?"

Reginald could not exactly say he did, as he was in doubt as to what Miss Cassy meant, but made some confused answer, and then asked to see Patience Allerby.

"She's in the housekeeper's room, I think," said Una. "Auntie will take you there, and when you are done with her I'll go to Garsworth with you."

"Will you, really? I'm so glad!" said Reginald, eagerly.

"I want to see Cecilia in the church," replied Miss Challoner, "about the concert."

"What concert?"

"Don't you know? Oh, we're going to have a concert in the schoolroom shortly. You are to be asked to sing."

"Delighted."

"Cecilia will play a piece—she doesn't like the piano as much as the organ, but we can hardly get that out of the church."

"I'm going to sing also," said Miss Cassy, shaking her curls, "so nice—quite operatic. I'll sing a duet with you, Mr. Blake, if you like."

Blake hastily excused himself, as he had great dread of Miss Cassy's vocal performances, which were, to say the least, somewhat screechy. The lady accepted his apology graciously, and then led him out of the room to find the housekeeper, leaving Una to get ready for the walk. Miss Cassy, being delighted to have a charming young man for audience, chattered all the way in a disconnected fashion.

"So damp, isn't it—quite chilly. I never

did like the weather. Very watery—rheumatic, you know. I mean the weather, of course—not myself! I think Patience is in her room—so kind of you to see your old nurse—quite delightful! Light of what's his name, you know—Moore—exactly; Irish melodies—so pretty! This is the door. Oh, Patience—you are in—so glad—here is Mr. Blake to see you! The squire's easier—yes, nerves, of course—I knew it. I'll go back to Una, Mr. Blake, and see you later on—very pleased, indeed—quite a treat to see a male. Sounds like the post—very odd, isn't it?—yes!"

And Miss Cassy, closing the door after her, departed leaving Reginald alone with his old nurse.

The tall placid woman, standing near the fireplace, made a step forward, as if to embrace Reginald, but restrained herself, as though doubtful how to proceed. Blake, however, crossed over to her and kissed her

affectionately, which seemed to awaken a feeling of emotion in her breast, for she flushed a little at the caress, and smiled lovingly at him. In her demure, slate-coloured dress, with the white apron and pale, rigid face, she looked like a woman who had never known what it was to love or be loved; but every now and then a flash in the sombre depths of her eloquent eyes betrayed the fiery nature hidden beneath that calm exterior. The young man's kiss seemed to warm her frozen soul to life, and as she resumed her seat, her face was rose-flushed, her eyes soft, and the hard lines about her mouth disappeared under the magic of Reginald Blake's presence. He, dark and handsome, leaned against the mantelpiece, looking down at her curiously, as if puzzled how to begin the conversation.

"I am so glad to see you, Master Reginald," she said, the hard voice in which she habitually spoke becoming soft and

tender. "I have not seen you for a long time."

"A whole week, Patience, that's all," he replied, carelessly. "You see I'm busy with my studies."

"That's right, dear!" she said, eagerly. "Work—work hard, and make a name in the world."

"For whose sake?" he asked, a little bitterly.

"For mine!"

There was a world of tenderness in the way in which she spoke the words, and her eyes seemed to devour him as she gazed. He moved restlessly, and with a supreme effort plunged straight into the object of his visit.

"Why not for my parents' sake?"

The woman's face lost its look of tenderness, and became hard and rigid as she pressed the arms of her chair convulsively, and looked up into his face.

"Who has been speaking to you about them," she asked fiercely.

"Doctor Larcher."

"And the reason?"

"Simply this: I am two-and-twenty years of age, so it's time I had some aim in life. Before I do this I want to know all about my parentage. Are my parents alive or dead?—who are they?—why was I placed in your charge?—can they, or their relations, assist me to get on in the world? I cannot move until I know who and what I am."

He spoke vehemently, and as he did so the woman seemed to shrink back into her chair with a nameless dread in her eyes. There was no sound for a moment. At last she broke the silence.

"Your parents were my master and mistress," she said at length, in a low, harsh voice, "married against their parents' wish."

"They were married, then?"

"Who said they were not?" she demanded, fiercely.

"No one. But the mystery of my birth led me to think there might be——"

"Shame!" she interrupted, vehemently. "You are wrong. There was no shame—they kept the marriage secret, for if known they would have lost their property. When you were born, they went over to France for the sake of your father's health, leaving you in my charge. I was to keep you till they could acknowledge you as their son; but before they could do so they died."

"Died!"

"Yes. Your father died of phthisis at Cannes six months after he left England, and your mother very soon followed him to the grave."

"She died of what?"

"A broken heart," replied Patience, in a low voice, "a broken heart, poor soul."

"Good God!"

"I heard of it shortly afterwards," she went on, rapidly, "and as your birth had never been acknowledged I determined to bring you up without letting anyone know the truth. After staying some time in London, I brought you to Doctor Larcher, and he has had charge of you since."

"Why did you come here?"

"Because it is my native place. I only intended to stay for a time, and then return to service in London, but Squire Garsworth wanted a housekeeper, so I took the situation in order to remain near you."

"Why did you not tell me of this before?"

"There was no need to," she answered, coldly, "and even now it is useless. Your parents are dead, and the property has gone to distant heirs."

"But I am the heir."

She shook her head.

"No, the property was not entailed—it

was left by will, and you have no claim on the present holder."

"Who was my father?"

"He had been in the army, but sold out when he married, and became a writer."

"What was his name?"

"Reginald Blake—the same as your own."

"It's my real name, then?"

She looked at him in surprise.

"Of course! Why should you not take your father's name? There was no reason."

"So I am alone in the world?"

"Yes, except for me."

He stepped over to her, and placed his arm caressingly on her shoulder.

"Ah, you have been a mother to me," he said quickly, "and I shall never forget it. No one could have acted with more kindness and fidelity."

Patience winced and shrank away from

his caress while he walked up and down the room, talking cheerfully.

"Now my mind is at rest," he said, with a sigh of relief. "I thought the mystery of my birth involved some stain, but since I have the right to bear my father's name, why! I feel quite happy. I can make my way in the world by myself, can ask the girl I love to be my wife."

"The girl you love," she repeated jealously.

"Yes, I will tell you her name, though no one else knows it—Una."

"Miss Challoner," said the woman, starting up; "impossible!"

"Why impossible?" he retorted gaily. "You think I am not rich enough. Never mind; I carry a fortune in my throat, and will soon be able to keep her in comfort. She loves me and I love her, so we shall be quite happy."

"I hope so," she said fervently. "May

God's blessing rest on your efforts. Yes, marry Una Challoner if she loves you, and make your own way without troubling about the dead."

"I never knew my parents," said Reginald, sighing, "so I can hardly regret them, but with Una to work for I will forget the past and look forward to the future. I have nothing to offer her now but a stainless name. Never mind; ambition can perform miracles. Now, good-bye, nurse; I must get back to Garsworth."

"Good-bye," she said, kissing him eagerly. "Come again soon, my dear boy; and although Una Challoner loves you, do not forget your old nurse."

"Of course not," he replied gaily, and walked away humming an air. Patience Allerby waited till the door was closed and the sound of his voice had died away, then fell on her knees, beating her breast with her hands and weeping bitterly.

"God! God!" she cried, amid convulsive sobs, "pardon my sin. It was for his sake, for his dear sake, not for my own. Let the dead past be forgotten. Let him never know anything but what I have told him, and bless him, oh God, in his future life."

There was a crucifix of black ebony against the wall, and from it, with pitying eyes, looked down the face of the Lord on the stricken woman kneeling before him. The ineffable sorrow of the sacred face seemed to calm her spirit, for she ceased to weep and her lips moved in a prayer which seemed to come from her heart.

"*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.*"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE BLIND ORGANIST.

"Naught have I seen of the earth, for mine eyes have been darkened
Since I was born to this life, with its toils and vexations,
Yet hath the Maker, in mercy, bestowed compensation,
Music, and love of sweet singing to lighten the burden.
Here, at the loud-swelling organ, my soul is responsive
To passion and grandeur of music, and sighings melodious,
It bursts from its prison of gloom, soaring upward rejoicing,
Borne on the stormy, majestical breath of the organ."

As a rule, the conversations of lovers are hardly worth recording, consisting, as they mostly do, of incoherent rhapsodies of love and devotion, with very little of that useful quality called common sense. But Reginald and Una were the most sedate of sweethearts, and talked of other things besides

the ardour of their passion. In this instance they were discussing their future and the chances of their marriage.

It would have been difficult to find a handsomer pair as they walked along; she fair and slender, with a charming smile on her face; he tall and dark, with a touch of haughtiness in his manly dignity. They looked like two lovers who had strayed from the enchanted garden of Boccaccio, with nothing to talk about but the pains and passions of Eros, but, alas, such thoughts are impossible, save under the magic influence of twilight; and this youthful pair, who seemed the incarnation of romance, were talking in a most prosaic fashion.

"You see, dear," said Reginald, after he had explained everything to Una, "it is not the slightest use my depending on my relations, even if I were to find them out."

"I don't think it's much use in any case," replied Una decisively. "It's far

better for you to depend upon yourself. But how do you intend to proceed?"

"It's rather difficult to say. I have no money and no chance of obtaining any. Patience had a certain sum which she paid to Doctor Larcher for my education. I believe," said the young man, somewhat bitterly, "that I've been mostly brought up by the vicar out of charity."

"Dr. Larcher has never said so."

"No, he is too kind-hearted and generous for that, but I feel sure that such is the case. Never mind; should it ever lie in my power I will repay his charity a thousand fold."

"Do you think he will like you becoming a singer?" asked Una apprehensively.

"I don't fancy he'll approve of it—at first," said Reginald bluntly, "but what else can I do? The law, the church and medicine all require money to make a start, and even then it is a difficult game to play. I know a good deal about music, and, accord-

ing to Beaumont, who is certainly no flatterer, I have an excellent voice. So it is my only chance."

"If the vicar approves, what will you do?"

"I'll ask him to lend me some money. I shall then go to London and place myself under a good master, and if my voice is good, with hard work I'll soon be able to do something."

"It seems very risky," said Una, with a sigh. "Many fail."

"And many succeed. If a man be sober, industrious and observant, he can hardly help succeeding. Beggars must not be choosers, and if I don't use the only talent I've got, what else is there for me to do? I cannot remain here all my life on the bounty of Dr. Larcher. If I did, there would be small chance of our marriage."

"I have a little money," she began timidly.

"Yes, I know," he answered hastily, "but I'm not the man to live on my wife. It is your dear self I want, not your money; though, as the squire's heiress, you are far above me."

Una laughed.

"I'm very doubtful about my being an heiress," she said gaily. "It is true I am the squire's next-of-kin, and should inherit, but you know how eccentric he is. The property is not entailed, so he can do as he likes."

"You mean he is going to leave it to his other self. Nonsense! That is the phantasy of a madman's brain. No court of law would uphold such a will. How he is going to leave it to himself when his *alter ego* is not in existence, I don't know."

"Nor I," replied Una frankly. "I know of course, he is mad, quite mad, and that any will made on the principle

of his hallucination would be set aside, but lately he has dropped hints about a son."

"A son?" Why he was never married."

"No; but he says he has a son who is somewhere about, and he intends to leave the property to him."

"Indeed. Then what becomes of his great scheme of enjoying the money in his re-incarnated body?"

"It's a mystery," said Miss Challoner, laughing.

"I should think it was, and whatever will he makes now, leaving the property away from you, would not hold good, for he certainly is not in his right senses. You could claim as next-of-kin."

"And I certainly should do so," replied Una, with decision. "But it is my opinion he'll live for a good long time yet."

"Humph! He's very ill."

"Creaking doors hang longest. But do

not let us speculate on his death. I would rather we made our own fortune."

The use of the plural member had a delicious sound for Reginald, and he felt strongly tempted to there and then kiss his lady-love, but as they were now crossing the bridge and several people were about, he restrained himself until a more convenient season.

"Never mind the Squire and his money, dear," he said fondly, "for your sake I am going to be the Mario of the future."

"I'm sure you will," replied Una, with the trustfulness of love, "you know I lived a long time in Germany and heard a number of good singers—your voice is quite as good as any, if not better."

"Flatterer!"

"Well, we'll see, Signor Reginald Mario," she said gaily, as they entered the churchyard, "when you are enchanting London audiences you will remember my prediction.

You should cross the poor gipsy's hand with silver."

"Can't mum," he retorted laughing; "I'm stone broke. However, there's no one about, so I'll do better—cross the gipsy's lips with kisses," and before she could draw back, this audacious young man put his words into action.

"Oh, Reginald!"

"Oh, Una," he mimicked lightly, "don't say a word or I'll take another. Come along, here's the church, and by Jove," as the sound of music broke on their ears, "there's Cecilia at the organ."

"And she's playing the Wedding March," cried Una blushing.

"It's a good omen, dear," he whispered, as they walked up the aisle, "this is like a rehearsal of marriage, isn't it?"

They both laughed gaily, and as their young voices rang through the empty church the organist turned round on her

seat rapidly to the direction from whence the sound proceeded.

Cecilia Mosser was one of those light-coloured women who bear the same relation to a full-coloured blonde as a fireless opal does to the same stone with a red spark glowing under its opaque whiteness. While Una had all the characteristics of a true blonde, flushed with the roseate hue of a strong vitality, these same characteristics were reproduced in Cecilia with a distinct want of colour and of life. She had the same pale complexion, the same golden hair and the same blue eyes, but the complexion was a dead white, and lacked the opalescent transparency of Una's, the golden hair was dull in appearance, without any lustre, and the azure eyes were coldly blue, though in this latter case, being sightless, they naturally did not reflect the soul within, having therefore a lifeless appearance. A sad, patient face it was, stamped with that ex-

pression of mute appeal so common to the faces of the blind. She was dressed in a dark gown, with a collar and cuffs of white linen, her bleached-looking hair being coiled smoothly at the back of her head.

"How are you, Cecilia?" asked Una, ascending the chancel steps. "I have come to see about the concert."

"Yes, I was expecting you, Miss," answered the blind girl in a soft fluty voice which, though low, was distinct and clear. "Is Mr. Blake with you? I thought I heard his step."

"Oh, I'm here," said Blake, advancing towards the organ. "What is the matter—eh?"

"I want you to sing at the concert," replied Cecilia, lightly touching the yellow keys of the organ; "Miss Una, of course, also."

"Let us sing a duet," suggested Una;

"'Oh, that we two were Maying,' or something of Mendelssohn's."

"The first is the best," said Reginald quickly. "I think every one will like that. Who else is going to perform, Cecilia?"

"Miss Cassandra and Mr. Priggs," she replied, touching off the names on her fingers. "Mr.——"

"What! Is Priggs going to sing?" interrupted Blake laughing.

"No; recite a piece of his own."

"I hope it will be intelligible."

"How severe you are," said Una smiling.

"Ah! you don't know Ferdinand's poetry," replied Reginald pathetically; "I do. It's a mixture of Keats, Thompson, Browning, Shakespeare——"

"And Priggs," finished Una.

"No, by Jove—that's the only thing it doesn't contain, unless you call halting verse and interminable poems Priggian,"

said the young man gaily. "Well, go on with the list, Cecilia."

"Dr. Larcher is going to give us a reading," said Cecilia, who had been listening to the analysis with a quiet smile, "and Mr. Pemberton sings a sea song; I think that's all, except Miss Busky and Simon Ruller."

"Last, but not least," remarked Una lightly. "The programme is excellent—let us hope the performers will be as good. It's next week, isn't it?"

"No; on Thursday fortnight," answered Cecilia. "Oh, I forgot, the choir sings a glee."

"And you play a piece, of course," said Reginald gravely. "This is capital. Well, now we've finished business, let us go in for pleasure. I want you to play me the 'Cujus animam.'"

"What for?" asked Una.

"I'm anxious to try my voice," said

Blake to her in a low tone, while Miss Mosser turned to the organ. "You know why—you must give me your candid opinion about it—so go down to the end of the church and tell me what you think."

"I'll be a very severe critic," observed Una, as she went away.

"The more so the better," called out Blake; "don't spare me—imagine you're the *Musical Times*."

Una laughed, and ensconced herself in a comfortable pew at the far end of the church just near the white marble font.

The quaint old church, with its high oaken roof and narrow, stained glass windows with their vivid tints, was filled with great masses of shadow, which produced a faint, misty twilight, eminently suited to the sacred character of the place. At intervals on either side of the wide nave arose the heavy, grey stone pillars,

their elaborately carved entablatures being hardly apparent in the semi-gloom overhead.

The flags of the centre aisle, worn by the feet of pious generations, made a broad path of whitish tint leading up to the chancel, ending at a flight of long, shallow steps, in the centre of which stood the brass lectern, in the form of an eagle. Between the nave and the chancel was a lance-shaped arch, on which gleamed a slender ribbon of gold, inscribed with a biblical text in vermillion. The sombre appearance of the choir seats, with their overhanging canopies, was somewhat relieved by the white glimmer of the communion table carved out of pure marble, on which stood a large crucifix of ebony, looking black and sharply defined against the great painted window at the back. Through the fantastically painted windows, with their bizarre figures of red, yellow,

and green, crept the grey light of the day, but suddenly a shaft of sunshine burst into the church, touching the tomb of a crusader with rainbow tints, while from the tall organ-pipes flashed gleams of golden fire.

All was faint and shadowy, like the confusion of a dream, and the dusky atmosphere seemed to be filled with the subtle perfume of the incense which had curled up from silver censers in the old Romish days.

Through the sombre shadows stole the rich, swelling notes of the organ which woke to life under the skilful fingers of the blind girl. A few great notes pealed from the mighty mouths of the pipes—Cecilia played the majestic melody, which floated grandly through the church—and then the volume of melodious sound sank downward to a low-breathed whisper as Blake began the "Cujus animam" with one re-

sonant note which rang out like the sound of a silver trumpet.

> "Cujus animam gementem
> Contristantur et dolentem
> Pertransivit gladius."

The voice of the singer seemed to float high in the air like that of some unseen angel hidden in the golden clouds, while far below the roll and thunder of the organ seemed to rise and fall like sullen surges beating upon a lonely shore. Una closed her eyes as that superb voice with its penetrating sweetness rang out the mournful words with an intensity of dramatic feeling which went to her very soul with its strong religious fervour. As the last note died away Una heard a voice behind her say "Bravo," and on turning her head saw Dr. Nestley standing close to her accompanied by a tall dark man whom she recognized at once as Basil Beaumont.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE VIEWS OF A CYNIC.

To rule mankind is all I crave
And at my feet to see them curled,
For if you make the world your slave
You'll ne'er be slave unto the world.

Evidently Dr. Nestley had become friendly with his quondam enemy, for both gentlemen now seemed to be on the best of terms with one another. Either the doctor had succumbed to the wonderful personal fascinations of Beaumont, or the artist had convinced Nestley that he was wrong in regarding him in a hostile manner.

On recognizing Miss Challoner, the young physician came forward to greet her, while Beaumont remained in the back-

ground lost in admiration at the wonderful beauty of her face, which appealed strongly to his artistic nature.

"I didn't expect to find you here, Miss Challoner," said Nestley eagerly; "my friend and I heard the singing and came in to listen; by the way, will you permit me to introduce Mr. Beaumont?"

Una bowed a little coldly, for she remembered what Reginald had said about the artist, but, hearing his name mentioned, Beaumont came forward and was formally presented. In spite of her distrust, Una could not but admire the handsome, tired-looking face she beheld, and was still further impressed by the peculiar *timbre* of his voice when he began to talk. Beaumont certainly possessed in no small degree that wonderful fascination of manner attributed to the ill-fated Stewarts of Scotland which atoned so much for their fickleness, treachery and ingratitude.

"It is Mr. Blake who is singing, I think," observed Basil idly, "he has a wonderful voice."

"Yes," answered Una, with a pleased smile. "I have never heard a finer—not even in Germany."

"Ah! you have been in Germany, Miss Challoner?"

"For some years—I stayed at Munich."

"A charming city which affords great opportunities for studying art both in music and painting."

"Did you study either, Miss Challoner?" asked Nestley, who seemed rather annoyed at the impression Beaumont had made.

"A little of both," she answered. "I was educated in Munich, but I'm afraid my learning was rather desultory—I sing a little—paint a little—and do both badly."

"That would be impossible," said Nestley, desirous of paying a compliment, but Una frowned at the remark.

"Don't, please," she said, coldly. "I dislike insincerity."

Nestley reddened a little at the tone of her voice and the obvious rebuke, on seeing which Una held out her hand to him with a charming smile.

"You must not mind what I say, Dr. Nestley," she observed, bending forward, "I'm afraid I'm dreadfully rude."

"And wonderfully charming," thought Beaumont, who, however, kept his opinion to himself, warned by the fate of his friend.

The young doctor, meanwhile, had hastily assured Una that he did not mind her severity, in fact rather liked it, and would doubtless in all sincerity have committed himself again only that Blake commenced to sing "Come, Margarita, Come," from Sullivan's "Martyr of Antioch," and they all listened attentively.

Cecilia played the graceful accompani-

ment of *arpeggi* lightly, while above this constant sweep of dissevered chords, rising and falling with the voice, the high, penetrating notes of the singer flowed smoothly onward and, as the organist played softly, the full purity of the voice could be heard with marvellous effect. Owing to want of training, Blake's voice lacked in a great measure the power to give a perfect rendering to the melody, but the richness and mellowness of his notes were undeniable.

When he had finished Beaumont's face betrayed the pleasure he felt, and Una, who was watching him closely, asked his opinion.

"A wonderful voice," he said, critically, as the three walked up the aisle, "but, of course, it requires a great deal of cultivation."

"I think it's charming," interposed Nestley, eager to curry favour with Una by

praising one whom she evidently regarded as a brother.

"Of course you would think so," replied Beaumont, a little contemptuously, "because you know nothing about the subject; to an uncultivated ear Blake's voice sounds well because he has a wonderfully fine organ, but to a musician there is a crudeness of style, a want of colouring, and a lack of refinement which makes him regret that such a great natural gift is not trained to its full capabilities."

"But you're not a musician?" said Nestley, nettled at the superior tone adopted by his friend.

"No," answered Basil, complacently, "but I have heard a great deal, and as most of my life has been passed among musicians, I have picked up a general knowledge of the technicality of the art. Shakespeare never committed a murder, yet he wrote Macbeth and Hamlet. Balzac

did not fall in love till somewhere about the forties, but he wrote 'Modeste Mignon,' and 'La Lys dans la vallee,' before that age—one does not need to be an artist to possess the critical faculty."

By this time they had arrived at the chancel, and Reginald came forward to meet them, blushing a little with modesty on discovering three listeners instead of one.

"I must congratulate you on your voice once more," said Beaumont, looking at him, "my advice is to go to London at once and study."

"London!" echoed Blake, disbelievingly, "why not Italy?"

"A tradition only," replied the artist, calmly, "because Italy is the land of song every singer thinks he or she must study there, but I assure you it's a mistake — London and Paris have as good teachers as Milan and Rome — I

may say better, for everyone goes to the place where the largest income is to be made."

"How cynical," said Una, playfully.

"And how true—this is not the golden age, Miss Challoner, but the age of gold—there is a vast difference between Arcadia and Philistia, I assure you."

"I think I'll take your advice," observed Blake, gaily, "perhaps I have a fortune in my throat, who knows?"

"Who, indeed?" said the artist, gravely, "they pay nightingales well now-a-days."

"All the better for Mr. Blake," said Una, lightly, "but how rude I am, I must introduce you two gentlemen to the organist—Miss Mosser—Dr. Nestley and Mr. Beaumont."

Beaumont, not knowing Cecilia was blind, merely bowed, but Nestley took the fragile hand of the girl and grasped it warmly.

"I enjoyed your playing so much," he said, heartily, "where did you learn?"

On hearing his voice the pale face of the blind girl coloured, and a painfully eager look crossed her features, as if she were trying to see the speaker's countenance in spite of her infirmity.

"What a beautiful voice," she murmured softly, and Nestley had to repeat his question before she answered:

"At the school for the blind at Hampstead," she said, turning towards him, which reply gave Nestley a painful shock as he realized her misfortune. With delicate tact, however, he passed the answer off lightly in a conversational manner.

"I don't know much about music myself." he said, easily, "it seems such a complicated affair—are you fond of it?"

"Very," answered the blind girl quickly. "You see it is the only pleasure I have. When I go out on to the common and feel

the fresh wind and smell the perfume of the gorse, I come back here and try and put it all into music. I often thank God for being able to play the organ."

It was deeply pathetic to hear her talk in this strain; shut out by her affliction from all the beauties of Nature, she could yet thank God for the one gift which enabled her in some measure to understand and appreciate what she had never beheld. Doctors, as a rule, are not very soft-hearted, but Nestley could hardly help feeling moved at the thrill of sadness which ran through her speech. This she perceived, and with a light laugh, hastened to dispel the illusion she had created.

"You must not think I am sad," she said, cheerfully, "on the contrary, I never was so happy in my life as I am here. I was brought up all my life in London, and when I was appointed organist here, you can have no idea of the pleasure I felt. I

have the common and the organ, while everyone is kind to me, so what have I to wish for? Now, Doctor Nestley, I must ask you to go, as I am about to practise. I think Miss Challoner and your friends have gone."

They were waiting for the doctor at the lower end of the church, so after saying good-bye to Cecilia, he hurried away into the dusky atmosphere, and as he reached Beaumont, the organ rolled out the opening chords of a mass by Pergolesi. Reginald went outside with Nestley, as he wished to speak to him about the Squire, and Una was left standing with Beaumont in the grey old church. They listened in silence to the deep thunder of the bass notes echoing in the high roof, when suddenly in the middle of a crashing chord the sonorous tones died away and a sweet, pure melody thrilled through the silence, which seemed almost oppressive after the tempest of sound.

"After the fire there came a still small voice," quoted Basil dreamily. "Do you remember how perfectly Mendelssohn has expressed that idea in music?"

"Yes, I heard the Elijah at the Albert Hall," replied Una in a matter-of-fact way, being a healthy English girl and not moved by the subtle meaning of the sacred music which touched so quickly the highly-strung nerves of this man.

"The Albert Hall," he repeated with a shrug. "Oh yes, very fine, I've no doubt, but to my mind it secularizes sacred music to hear it there—one hears a volume of sound—an immense number of voices in chorus and solos by the best artistes; but where is the soul of the work? one only finds that in a church. The Messiah was first heard in England in Westminster Abbey, and it was there, following the example set by the king, that the whole audience arose at the Hallelujah Chorus,

but it was not the music alone, grand as it is, that produced this sudden burst of emotion, it was the august fane grey with centuries of tradition, the presence of the mighty dead sleeping around, and to crown all, the dramatic grandeur of the chorus. All these together wrought on the feelings of those present and they did homage to the sublimity of the music—such a thing would be impossible in the Albert Hall."

"Don't you think you're giving all the praise to the surroundings and nothing to the musician," said Una quickly; "a true composer could impress his ideas on his hearers without any other aid."

"I've no doubt he could," replied Beaumont carelessly, "and no doubt plenty of people have felt emotion at Handel's music in the Albert Hall, but even Handel's genius would never have created such an effect as I have described anywhere but in a church; of course I haven't mentioned the memor-

able shaft of sunlight which deserves praise for its share in the affair."

Something in the flippancy of this remark jarred upon Una's feelings, so she made no reply, but walked outside into the cool fresh air, followed by Beaumont.

He accompanied her as far as the lich-gate and then raised his hat.

"I won't go any further, Miss Challoner," he said. "I'm in a meditative mood, and will take a look round this old place. I hope to see you again soon at the Grange."

"The Grange?" she questioned, looking at him inquiringly.

"Yes, I'm coming to see the Squire about painting his portrait, you know."

"Of course," she replied quickly. "I remember Patience told me."

"Patience," he asked in a startled tone, "did you say Patience?"

"Yes, Patience Allerby, the house-

keeper," said Una gaily. "How pale you look, just as if you had seen a ghost—I dare say it's the effect of the church and music; good-bye, at present," and she walked quickly away.

He raised his hat mechanically and stood staring at the ground, looking pale and haggard.

"Patience Allerby," he said in a low voice. "After all these years—Patience Allerby."

## CHAPTER X.

### THE GHOST OF A DEAD LOVE.

Is this the face I loved of yore,
Ere years had run;
Alas! I care for it no more,
Old love is done;
We soon forget what we adore
At twenty-one.

It was now about four o'clock in the afternoon, and the short autumnal day was rapidly closing in, the grey veil of the sky was rent here and there, showing a patch of pale cold blue, while the setting sun was tinting the ragged clouds in the west with irridescent hues.

Beaumont stood in the long, rank grass of the graveyard, thinking deeply, his eyes fixed dreamily on the ancient tombstones around, with their half obliterated inscrip-

tions and weed-grown mounds of earth. Behind him was the old church, its grey walls covered with close-clinging ivy, from out which peered the grotesque faces of the gargoyles, leering demoniacally at the silent figure. The great square tower, built of rough stone, stood out massively against the dull grey sky, and round it every now and then flashed the pigeons who lived therein, gleaming white in the faint light of the sun. He could hear the hoarse murmur of the river flowing past, the shrill voices of the children in the street, and at intervals the rising and falling of the organ music within. All this touched his artistic sensibilities, and he fell into a strain of half-melancholy, half regretful reflection which, for the moment, gave him a better nature than the bitter cynicism of his usual thoughts.

This man was not altogether bad ; he had originally started in life with the best

intentions, but his nature had been warped and twisted by misfortunes and temptations into its present state. It was true that he was to all appearances thoroughly bad, and that many had cause to regret his friendship, yet occasionally he would do a kind action or help a poor struggler, which showed that some of his early belief in humanity yet remained in his world-worn heart.

He was thinking now,—thinking of a woman—a woman whom he had loved and left many years before, and the thoughts evoked were anything but pleasant. With an involuntary sigh he walked down to the Gar and, seating himself on a flat tombstone which set forth the virtues of Susan Peller, deceased, he let his chin sink on his hand, and gave himself up to dead memories—the memories of youth, of love, and of disappointment.

A sudden flash of the dying sunlight

gleamed over the river, turning its sullen, grey waters to a sheet of gold, and the sight brought back to his mind an hour when he was young, and he leaned over the parapet of a balcony, with a woman by his side, both looking at the shimmering Thames, golden in the sunset. He could recall it vividly, even after the lapse of these many years—the shining river, the confused mass of houses huddled under the dusky cloud of London smoke, and far away the swelling dome of St. Paul's, looking aerial and fairy-like against the twilight sky, while above the great mass gleamed the golden cross shining in the firmament like the visionary symbol of Constantine. They were poor, not very well housed or fed, but the glamour of youth and hope was about them, and they saw in the shining river sweeping under the golden cross an omen of a happy future. Then the dream-picture grew faint and blurred,

clouds swept across the golden heavens, and from amid the sombre gloom there looked forth a tearful woman's face with pitiful, appealing eyes.

With an impatient sigh Beaumont roused himself from his day dream to find himself seated on a cold stone under a sky from whence the glory of the sunset had departed; and beside him silently stood a veiled woman. He jumped to his feet in surprise, feeling somewhat cramped, and was about to speak when the woman threw back her heavy veil, showing him the pitiful face of his dream.

"Patience Allerby!" he gasped, recoiling a step.

"Patience Allerby," she replied, sternly, folding her hands in front of her black dress, "the very woman, Basil Beaumont, whom you loved, ruined, and deserted in London more than twenty years ago."

Beaumont, with an effort, threw off the

glamour of past thoughts which had haunted him all the afternoon, and, with a sneering laugh, relapsed once more into the bitter-tongued, cynical man of the world. He rapidly rolled a cigarette, and, having lighted it, began to smoke, gazing critically meanwhile at the stern white face looking at him from out the shadowy twilight.

"More than twenty years ago!" he repeated, thoughtfully. "Humph! it's a long time — and now we meet again! You've altered, Patience—yes, altered a great deal—for the worse."

She laughed bitterly.

"I hardly think the life I have led since you left me was the kind to enable me to retain my good looks."

"No?" he said, interrogatively; "and why not? You are housekeeper to Squire Garsworth, I understand — not a very wearying position! Trouble tells more on

woman's beauty than years; so, as you have had no trouble——"

"Had no trouble!" echoed Patience, in a low, harsh voice. "Man, man! do you think one needs to live in the world to know what trouble is? You are wrong. Down in this secluded village I have passed many a bitter hour thinking of you."

"And why?" he asked, cynically.

"I think you can guess the reason. When I left Garsworth to go to service in London you said you loved me, and I thought the son of a gentleman was to be my husband."

"You always did expect too much."

"You came to London shortly afterwards and met me there by appointment. I left my situation and lived with you."

"As my mistress, yes; not my wife."

"No! You were too cowardly to do justice to the woman you ruined. A child was born—a boy whom I idolized. But,

instead of that being a bond to draw us closer together, you left me — left me to starve with my child in the streets of London."

"I left you because I saw a chance of making money," he said, complacently. "You were a drag on me, and I could not endure poverty, even with you, my dear. As to starving, I left you what money I could spare."

"Five pounds!" she said, coldly. "The price of a woman's heart, according to your calculation; it enabled me to pay the landlady and bring myself and the child to Garsworth."

"Why did you not stay in London?"

"Because I did not want to sink deeper than I had done. I was brought up by pious parents, Basil Beaumont, and the sin I committed with you seemed to cut me off for ever from all hope of mercy. I resolved to sin no more—to expiate, if I

could, by prayer and charity the evil life I had led in London. When I came down here my parents were dead, and I was alone in the world."

"You had the child."

"Yes, I had the child — your child and mine—but no one ever knew I was his mother. No, I did not wish our sin to be visited on his head. I did not want him to be pointed at as a nameless outcast."

"Very creditable of you, I'm sure," said Beaumont, with a sneer. "And what did you do?"

"I invented a story that I had been in the service of the child's parents, who had afterwards gone to France and died there. I said I was the child's nurse, and placed him in the care of Dr. Larcher to be brought up. What little money I could spare out of my salary as housekeeper was given to the vicar as money left to the

child by his father, and to this day the vicar does not suspect the truth."

"Quite a romance," said Beaumont, lightly. "I had no idea you had such inventive powers. But there is one thing I would like to know—the child's name."

"In order to claim him?" she asked, bitterly.

"My faith! no. I've got enough to do in looking after myself, without troubling about a hulking boy. You need never be afraid of that, Patience. Come, tell me the boy's name."

"Reginald Blake."

The cigarette dropped out of Beaumont's nerveless fingers, and his white face grew a shade whiter.

"Reginald Blake!" he whispered under his breath; "the young fellow who sings?"

"The same."

Beaumont remained silent for a few moments, thinking deeply.

"I have certainly no reason to be ashamed of my son," he said, coolly, looking at Patience. "You deserve credit for the way you have brought him up."

"I have done so as some expiation for my sin."

"Bah! Don't be melodramatic!" he said, coarsely. "You brought him up because he was your son—not because of any expiation rubbish! He doesn't know who he is?"

"No. I have spared him that knowledge of shame; let us bear our sin alone."

"Humbug! Our sin, as you call it, doesn't trouble me in the slightest. In fact, I'm rather pleased than otherwise."

"What do you mean?" she asked in alarm.

"Mean—that he's got an uncommonly fine tenor voice, and I don't see why money shouldn't be made out of it."

Patience sprang towards him like an enraged tigress, her eyes flashing fire.

"Not by you," she hissed, with her mouth so close to his face that he could feel her hot breath upon his cheek. "Not by you. I've brought him up all these years by myself without troubling you for money—he thinks his birth is honourable, and has every chance of making a career for himself, so you are not going to mar it for your own vile ends."

"Don't lose your temper," he said, coolly. "I'll do what I please."

"I have your promise not to claim him," she panted, with a look of despair in her eyes, "your sacred promise."

The artist laughed in a gibing manner.

"Bah! That for my promise," he said, snapping his fingers in the air. "I'm not going to lose the chance of making money out of him for any sentimental rubbish."

"You will tell him you are his father?"

"I will."

"And that you deserted us both in London?"

Beaumont winced at the sting of her words.

"I'll tell him what I think fit," he said angrily, "and make him do what I please. I am his father."

"Will you indeed?" she said jeeringly, though her face worked in convulsive rage. "You are the father who deserted him when a child, and now want to make money out of him; you would disgrace him in his own eyes by telling him the real story of his birth. I tell you no, Basil Beaumont, you'll do no such thing."

"Who will stop me?"

"I will."

"A very laudable intention, but how do you propose to carry it out?"

"I will tell him the whole story of my sin," she said deliberately. "How I loved

you and was betrayed, how you left both him and me to starve in the streets of London, and only claim him as a son to make money out of his one gift. I'll tell him all this, and then we'll see if he respects and obeys you."

"He is my son."

"Over whom you have no authority; he is of age, and you cannot make him your slave. As to the rest, I'll take care that everyone in the village knows the story, and you'll be drummed out of the place as the scoundrel you are."

Clever as he was, Beaumont saw Patience held the trump card, so suddenly forsook his dictatorial manner and spoke blandly.

"Very well, I'll say nothing to him just now."

"You'll never say anything to him," she said sternly. "Stay in this village if you like, but do not dare to reveal my secret to Reginald Blake—if you do it will be the

worse for you; I am not going to have him ruined for life by your treachery."

"But, Patience—my own son."

"Bah!" she snarled, turning on him viciously, "don't talk like that to me—a scoundrel you were and a scoundrel you are—don't touch me, don't come near me, but breathe one word of my secret and as sure as there's a God above us I'll do what I say."

Beaumont made a step forward as if to seize her, but with a gesture of loathing she drew her dress around her and fled away into the darkness, leaving him standing alone by the river. He remained silent for a few moments, then his brow cleared, and he resumed his nonchalant manner, though his face still remained pale and haggard.

"My son Reginald," he said, lightly rolling a cigarette, "I had no idea of such luck. Ah, you she cat, I'll cut your claws yet; I'll make money out of that

voice yet, in spite of your threats, my fine madame."

Suddenly a thought struck him as he lighted his cigarette, and he laughed softly.

"Good heavens!" he said with a shrug. "I admire Miss Challoner, so does he—it appears," continued Mr. Beaumont, sauntering away; "that I'm the rival of my own son."

## CHAPTER XI.

### MR. BEAUMONT MAKES A DISCOVERY.

When one is playing in the game of life,
'Tis wrong to throw away a single card,
Lest by some odd mistake of circumstance
The card despised—if played with dext'rous hand—
Should gain an unexpected victory.

When Basil Beaumont came to think over things, it struck him as somewhat strange that Patience should have voluntarily told him a secret, for the concealment of which she had several excellent reasons. Firstly, she must have had a great struggle with her pride before bringing herself to address the man to whom she owed her ruin. Secondly, on informing Beaumont that Reginald was his son, she must have known there were great chances of him reveal-

ing the whole story to the young fellow out of sheer devilry ; and thirdly, knowing that Reginald was clever, she must have expected his penniless father would try and make money out of his talents.

Beaumont was too astute a reader of character to blind himself to the fact that Patience must have been aware of these three things, hence his wonder at her telling him what she did not want known. But the artist, clever as he was, still lacked discernment to recognise the full subtlety of a woman's instincts, else he would have readily seen that Patience feared his ignorance of the real state of affairs more than his knowledge.

She heard that he was in the village, and acquainted with Reginald Blake, and she was also aware that he was coming to the Grange to paint Squire Garsworth's portrait. Had he seen her there he would have made inquiries concerning her position, and

among other things would doubtless have ascertained that she was Reginald's nurse. Knowing that she had left London with her own son, such a weak story as she told about Blake's parentage would not have imposed upon him for a moment, and by putting two and two together he would have discovered everything, with the natural result that he would have recognised Blake as his own child, sought him out, and told him the whole story of his birth.

In order to avert such a calamity, she determined to boldly take the bull by the horns, and tell Beaumont everything, at the same time warning him that she would embitter Reginald's mind against him should he dare to speak out. The result of her interview in the churchyard was as she expected. Beaumont was too cunning to risk the dislike of his own son, and thereby lose any chance of influencing him for his

own ends, so he quietly acquiesced in the line of conduct she laid down. Patience returned to the Grange thoroughly satisfied that she had disarmed Beaumont by pointing out how she could turn Reginald against him, so the astute man of the world, abandoning his desire to play the part of a long-lost father, determined to wait for a few weeks and see how things turned out. Then he intended to let his plans be guided to a large extent by circumstances, and had no doubt that he would then be able to out-manœuvre Patience by a little dexterous generalship.

A few days after his curious meeting with Patience in the churchyard, Beaumont set out for a long walk in the morning, as he wanted to think over the aspect of things, and pedestrianism always stimulated his brain. It was a bright, fresh morning, with a deeply blue sky, a cheerful sun shining, and a keen, fresh wind blowing

across the common on to which he strolled. The gorse was in bloom, and every breath of wind brought the odour of its peach-like scent to his nostrils. How often in his Bohemian life had that odour recalled the wide, bare common, with its miles of gorse-covered ground, and made him long half regretfully for the quiet country village where his youth had been passed.

But now that the common was actually before him, by some curious contradiction of nature he did not feel the least regret or longing for his youth, but on the contrary, strolled over the waste ground, hatching all kinds of plots and plans in his busy brain.

All at once, as he stood on the edge of a gentle slope, where the ground was hollowed out like a cup and surrounded by the dark green of the gorse with its golden blossoms, he saw a woman seated on a grassy bank, apparently basking in the

sun. Her hands were lying idly in her lap, and with her face turned upward to the bright sunshine, she was drinking in the sweet, keen air which swept over the wild moorland. Beaumont saw that it was Cecilia Mosser who sat there, and for a moment half envied the blind girl in spite of her great sorrow, for her pleasant enjoyment of nature.

"She looks like the Goddess of Desolation," murmured Beaumont, as he descended the slope, "or some eyeless Destiny that sees nothing, yet governs all!"

Lightly as he walked over the soft, green grass, the blind girl heard the sound of his muffled footsteps, and turned her face in the direction from whence she heard them come, with a questioning look on her placid face.

"How do you do, Miss Mosser?" said Beaumont, tranquilly. "I was taking a

stroll on the common, and saw you sitting here alone, like the Genius of Solitude."

"I often come here," observed Cecilia, placidly, folding her hands. "This is a favourite spot of mine—I know every inch of the way."

"You are not afraid of losing yourself?"

"I was at first," said the blind girl, with a quiet laugh, "but I soon got to know my way about. I could find my way here on the darkest night."

"Like Bulwer Lytton's Nydia," remarked Beaumont, idly casting himself down on the grass.

"Yes. Like her, it is always darkest night with me," replied Cecilia, with a sigh. "Still, I have my compensations, for I can hear many sounds that very likely escape the notice of you fortunate people who can see."

"What kind of sounds?" asked the

artist, more for the sake of making a remark than because he cared to know."

"The flowing of the river, the whispering of the wind, the humming of the bees and the rustle of the gorse—they all seem to me to have human voices and tell me stories. I can well understand those old legends where mortals heard voices everywhere, and understood the sayings of the waves and the melancholy voice of the night winds."

"As Siegfried understood the language of birds," said Beaumont. "You require no dragon's blood to teach you that, I suppose?"

"I don't know what you mean, exactly," replied Cecilia, in a puzzled tone, for she had never heard of the Niebelung's Ring, "but the birds do speak to me—that is, I fancy they do—I love to hear the cuckoo and the throstle, then the lark—ah! the lark is the most charming of all!"

"So the poets think. There is no bird who has inspired more poetry than the lark from Shakespeare down to Tennyson—and I suppose you put all your fancies into music?"

"Yes, I often try to do so, but I don't think anyone understands the meaning but myself," answered Cecilia, with a faint smile. "You know the English are not a music loving nation."

"That depends on how you define music," said the artist, cynically. "The great B. P. like something with a tune in it, but when they hear anything they can't understand, such as Bach and Spohr, they admire it all the same. I'm afraid the B. P.'s a humbug."

"You are terribly severe," said Cecilia, laughing. "I hope you won't criticise our concert?"

"No. I assure you I am the most lenient of critics; I shall come to admire

beauties, not to find out faults. Besides, Blake is going to sing—and his voice is charming."

"Yes, it is," replied the blind girl, cordially, "and Miss Challoner sings very well, also. She is going to sing a duet with Mr. Blake, if she can get away for one night from the squire."

"Oh, that will be easily arranged, I've no doubt," said Beaumont, carelessly. "Doctor Nestley will attend to that."

As he uttered this name a vivid flush passed over the pale face of the girl, and Beaumont noticed it with secret amazement.

"Hullo!" he said to himself, "I wonder what this means? I must find out."

It was curious that he should trouble himself about such a trivial matter; but Beaumont was a wise man, who never overlooked the smallest thing he thought might prove useful to him. At present an idea

had suddenly shot into his scheming brain —it was only an embryo idea, still it might help him in some way. He was completely in a mist as to what he was going to do, but Cecilia's blush had given him a clue to something tangible, and he immediately began to artfully question the blind girl so as to obtain some possible result.

"You know Doctor Nestley, of course?" he said, looking keenly at her face, from whence the red flush had died away.

"Yes, I met him a few days ago; he was in the church when Mr. Blake was singing," observed Cecilia, in a low tone. "I heard him speak—what a beautiful voice."

"Ah! I know the reason of the blush, now," thought Beaumont; "she loves him. Good Heavens! what a hopeless passion! She loves Nestley, and he loves Una Challoner. How tricky Dan Cupid is, to be sure."

As he had made no answer, the blind girl went on speaking.

"As I cannot see a face, I always guess what it is like by the voice. Doctor Nestley has a beautiful speaking voice—is his face handsome?"

"Rather handsome," said Beaumont, now seized with a cruel desire to fan the flame of hopeless love which burned in this blind woman's heart. "Yes, I suppose a woman would call his face handsome—but it's rather sad."

"Sad!" echoed Cecilia, in a startled tone; "why is his face sad?"

Beaumont shrugged his shoulders.

"Ouf!" he replied, coolly, "how should I know?—because his soul is sad, I presume. The face is the index of the mind, you know. I daresay it runs this way—his face is sad because his soul is sad, and the soul sadness is caused by a sad life."

"Is he unhappy, then?" asked Cecilia, breathlessly.

"I should say not—now," said Beaumont, with emphasis, "but when I knew him in London a few years ago he had met with many reverses of fortune."

"Poor Doctor Nestley," sighed the blind girl, seized with a sudden desire to comfort this unhappy man, of whom she knew absolutely nothing save that he had a beautiful speaking voice. "Do you know his story."

Whereupon Beaumont, who knew from Shakespeare that "pity is akin to love" set himself to work to awaken Cecilia Mosser's pity, and told a marvellously pathetic story of Nestley's early life in which truth and fiction were so dexterously blended that the hero himself would have been puzzled to say which was real and which false. He attained his object, however, for he saw by the varied emotions

that passed over the blind girl's expressive face how moved she was by the story.

"Poor Doctor Nestley," she said again, "poor, poor Doctor Nestley."

"Oh, but all his misery is past now," said Beaumont, lightly, "he has weathered the storm, and will, no doubt, some day marry a woman who will make him happy."

The blind woman laid her hand on her heart, as if she felt there a cruel pain, then spoke to Beaumont in a strangled kind of voice:

"You must think me a curious creature, Mr. Beaumont," she said, rapidly, "to take such an interest in a man of whom I know nothing, but remember I am blind, and be kind to my failing. I can only judge people by their voices, and Doctor Nestley's voice has affected me more than anyone else's. Why, I do not know. Of course I am precluded by my misfortune from many

things, but — but — you understand — ah, you must understand how difficult it is for me to conceal my feelings. He is a stranger, I am a blind woman, but his voice rouses in me a strange feeling I cannot explain even to myself. I know I am foolish talking like this, so forget what I have said. You will forget, will you not?"

"Miss Mosser," said Beaumont, gravely, rising to his feet, "you may be sure I will respect what I have heard as a sacred confidence."

"Thank you, thank you, very much," cried the poor woman, while the tears ran down her cheeks. "I know I am foolish. You must despise me for the way I've spoken. Still, I'm blind—blind."

Beaumont felt a pang of pity in his hard heart at the anguish of this unhappy woman, shut out from all love as between man and woman by her misfortune, and he

was about to speak when Cecilia lifted her head.

"Will you go now, Mr. Beaumont?" she said, in a low voice. "Please leave me. I will be all right soon, and can then go home. But you will not forget your promise?"

"My promise is sacred," said the artist, slowly, and turning away he left the blind woman seated in the hollow with her hands clasped on her lap, and her sightless eyes turned upward to the blue sky.

"Strange," he thought, as he lighted a cigarette, "that girl has fallen in love with a voice, and does not even know she is in love, although she half guesses it. She knows nothing of Nestley and yet she loves him. Why? because he has a charming voice. I suppose we must call it a woman's instinct—ah, if she only knew how hopeless her love is—Nestley is too much bewitched by Una to waste a thought on her."

This discovery, slight as it was, gratified Beaumont's keen sense of intrigue, as it gave him another card to play in the game against Patience. If he could do nothing with Reginald because he was embittered against him by his mother, still he could separate him from Una by circulating a few skilful falsehoods. If Cecilia ever learned that Nestley loved Una, she was too much of a woman to keep silent in the matter, and through her Una would hear of Nestley's infatuation ; and, again, to secure Nestley to herself, Cecilia, knowing Reginald adored Una, would tell him of this new complication, with the result that Nestley and Reginald would quarrel over Miss Challoner, and, perhaps, in the end, such a quarrel would part Una and her lover for ever. It was all very vague and intangible as yet, still Beaumont felt in some mysterious way that the knowledge of the blind girl's love for Nestley might

prove useful to him in weaving his nets around his son so as to secure him entirely to himself.

"Reginald and Nestley both love Una," he mused, as he sauntered home. "Cecilia Mosser loves Nestley. Yes, the materials for a complication are there. How, I don't see at present—still the more cards I have to play against Patience Allerby the sooner I'll win the game."

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER.

"The sower scattereth his seeds
In rich or barren ground,
And soon the earth in place of weeds
With golden corn is crowned."

MEANWHILE the old squire was much better in health, owing to the skill of Dr. Nestley, but dreading a relapse he insisted upon the young doctor staying with him for a time, and, though miserly as a rule, yet paid him a handsome sum for his services, so great was his dread of death. As Nestley's practice was not a very large one he looked upon this whim of the squire's as an unexpected piece of good luck, so made a hurried visit to the country town where he lived and, having arranged with his partner about the carrying on of their joint

business, returned to Garsworth and took up his abode at the Grange as the medical attendant of the old man.

The village doctor did not give in to this arrangement without a struggle, but Squire Garsworth, who consulted no man's feelings or interests when they clashed with his own desires, soon reduced the local Sangrado to silence.

Mr. Beaumont came daily to the Grange in order to paint the portrait of its master, and was now deeply interested in the picture, which was beginning to have a wonderful fascination for him. In truth the squire was no commonplace model, for his keen, ascetic face with the burning eyes and his spare figure wrapped in a faded black velvet dressing-gown made a wonderfully picturesque study. Besides, Basil liked to hear the wild extravagant talk of the old man, who wandered on in a desultory sort of manner, mingling gay

stories of his hot youth, with mystical revelations of mediæval alchemists and whimsical theories of spiritual existence. That he was mad, Beaumont never for a moment doubted; nevertheless, his madness was productive of a certain fantasy of thought that proved most alluring to the poetic nature of the artist, weary of the commonplace things of the work-a-day world.

With regard to Reginald the artist treated him in his usual manner, and neither by word nor deed betrayed the relationship which existed between them, but nevertheless used all his powers of fascination to attain a mastery over the young man's mind.

In this he was partially successful, for nothing is so flattering to the vanity of an unformed youth as the notice bestowed upon him by a cultured man of the world. The artist told him stories of London and

Parisian life, described the famous men he had met, the beautiful women he had known, and the keen excitements of Bohemian life, thus investing an unknown world with a magic and glamour which could not fail to attract a nature so clever, ardent and impressionable as that of this unsophisticated lad.

Patience Allerby, living in a state of almost monastic seclusion, congratulated herself upon her foresight in defeating Beaumont's possible plans, little dreaming that he was now enmeshing her son in subtle toils which would render him the willing slave of his heartless father. It was true that Una, with a woman's keen instinct, distrusted the brilliant adventurer, and went so far as to warn Reginald against him, but the young man received such warning with a somewhat ill grace and talked about the need of experience. Beaumont, with his keen power of penetration, soon

discovered that Una distrusted him, and as it was his aim to gain her over to his side he soon hit upon a plan by which he hoped to achieve his end.

One morning, after he had been working at the squire's portrait, he was strolling out on the terrace when he met Una leaning over the balustrade, looking at the still pool of water, encircled by a marble rim, in the centre of which was a group of Naiads and Tritons who should have spouted water in wreaths of foam from their conch shells, but as the source of the fountain was dried up there only remained the stagnant waters in the basin, reflecting their enforced idleness.

Una was thinking about Beaumont when he appeared, and in no very generous strain, as she was afraid of his rapidly increasing influence over the plastic mind of her lover —therefore when the artist paused beside her she was by no means prepared to receive

him with that suave courtesy with which she generally greeted everyone.

"I'm glad to see you, Miss Challoner," observed Beaumont lifting his hat, "as I want to speak to you about Blake."

"About Mr. Blake," said Una rather coldly, "yes?"

"Of course you know how I admire his voice," remarked Beaumont leisurely, "and thinking it is a pity he should waste its sweetness on the desert air of Garsworth I wrote up to a friend of mine in London."

"That is very kind of you, Mr. Beaumont," said Una in a more cordial tone, "and what does your friend say?"

"He wants Blake to go up to London, and will take him to Marlowe, who is a very celebrated teacher of singing; if Marlowe is satisfied, Blake can study under him, and when he is considered fit can make his appearance."

"It will take a lot of money," observed Una thoughtfully.

"Oh! I've no doubt that can be arranged," said Beaumont quietly. "Blake and myself will come to some agreement about things, but I am anxious that Blake should benefit by his talents."

"What do you mean?" asked Miss Challoner in a puzzled tone, "I do not understand."

"Of course you do not," answered the artist smoothly. "You do not understand the world—I do—and at the cost of expenditure of money, and sacrifice of illusions. Blake has an exceptionally fine organ and great musical talent; if he went up to London unprovided with money—of which I understand he has not any great store—he would very likely be picked up by some hanger-on of musical circles who would do him more harm than good, perhaps force him to sing before he was matured

and thus run the very probable risk of a failure—or if he was taught by a good master and made a great success, unless he was very careful, some impresario would entice him into some agreement to last for years which would be eminently disadvantageous to him in the end."

"But surely no men are so base?"

Beaumont shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear lady, they don't call it baseness but business—the only difference is in the name however—and how would leeches live if there were no one for them to live on? The Genius very often has no business capabilities and no money, the Leech, as a rule, has both, and as poor Genius cannot get himself or his works before the public without the help of Mr. Middleman Leech, of course that gentleman expects to be well-paid for his trouble, and generally pays himself so well that Genius gets the worst of it—the Middleman gets the money, the

public get the pleasure, and the Genius—well, he gets next to nothing, except the delightful thought that his works have enriched one man and pleased another. Genius is a fine thing, no doubt, but the capability of being a leech is finer."

"And yet you propose to be the middleman between Mr. Blake and the public," said Una, looking at him keenly.

"Only to save him from others," observed Beaumont quickly. "For all I know, Blake may be an exceedingly clever business man and quite capable of holding his own against the tribe of Leech and Middleman, still he has no money wherewith to bring his voice to that perfection which will make it a saleable article. I can supply that money, and as the labourer is worthy of his hire, I expect a fair remuneration for my trouble, but I will act honestly towards him, and neither force him into singing before he is fit, nor bind him for any term of years;

if he makes a financial and artistic success through my help, I am willing to receive what is my just due, but if he goes to London with no influence—no friends—no money—with nothing but that fine voice, well then, unless he is as I said before a clever business man, there will be some fine pickings for Mr. Leech."

"It's a dreadfully wicked world," sighed Una.

"It is as God made it," rejoined Beaumont cynically, "I don't think mankind have improved it much, but I daresay we're no worse than we ever were, the only change I can see is the art of concealment—it was fashionable to be wicked in Borgian Rome, so accordingly everyone proclaimed his or her darling sins from the housetops, now it is considered the correct thing to be decent, so we sin in private and preach in public; the wickedness is with us all the same, but we hide it carefully and prate about the

morality of nineteenth century England compared with sixteenth century Rome."

"You are rather pessimistic."

"My misfortune, not my fault, I assure you," returned the artist carelessly. "Very likely if I had gone through life wrapped up in the cotton wool of position and money I would have found human nature all that is honest and true. Unfortunately Poverty is a deity who takes a pleasure in destroying the illusions of youth, therefore I see the world in a real and not in an ideal sense—it's unpleasant but useful."

"I hope Reginald will never cherish such harsh thoughts," murmured Una.

"That depends upon the great god Circumstance, but if he comes to London I'm afraid he will be disenchanted. Arcady may be found in this isolated village I've no doubt, but London soon disillusionises the most generous and confiding nature, however, let us hope for the best—but

what do you say about my offer, Miss Challoner?"

"Well really," said Una with a laugh, "what can I say? it is Mr. Blake's business, and not mine."

"Still, you take an interest in him," observed Beaumont keenly.

"As a very clever man I do," replied Una serenely, for she was determined not to betray her love to this cold-eyed man of the world. "I think it is a pity he should be condemned to stay down here.'

"I think so also," said Beaumont cordially, for he was too crafty to press a question he saw might prove distasteful to the proud woman before him, "so I'll speak to Blake."

"And how are you getting on with my cousin's picture?" asked Una, dexterously turning the conversation as they walked down the terrace.

"Oh, very well indeed—it will make an

excellent picture, and I enjoy talking to the Squire, his ideas are so very strange."

"The effect of solitude I've no doubt," replied Una absently, "a solitary existence generally engenders strange thoughts."

"Exactly. I'd rather talk to a recluse than to a man or woman of the world, for although the ideas of a hermit may be old-fashioned they are infinitely fresh."

"Don't you like Society then?"

"Sometimes I do—man is a gregarious animal you know—but Society people as a rule are fearful humbugs. I suppose a certain amount of deception is necessary to make things go smooth. A tells lies to B and B knows them to be lies, still he believes them, because to preserve a necessary friendship with A it won't do to tell him he's a liar; if all our friends were put in the Palace of Truth it would be a mighty unpleasant world, I assure you.

"But you don't think it is necessary to

tell falsehoods to make things go smoothly ?" said Una, rather shocked.

"I daresay that's the plain, brutal truth," retorted Beaumont coolly ; "lies are the oil which diplomacy pours on the troubled waters of Society. Ye Gods ! what a world of humbugs we are to be sure."

"Well, good-bye just now," said Una laughing, as she turned away, "don't forget to tell Mr. Blake about London."

"Oh no, I won't forget," replied Beaumont, and taking off his hat, he strolled away down the avenue, very well satisfied with the result of his conversation.

"I think I've succeeded in pacifying her," he murmured to himself, "now she sees how anxious I am to help her lover she won't distrust me any more—it's the parable of the sower over again—a little seed sown in fruitful ground bears a goodly crop—now I am sowing the seed—when I get Reginald in London I will reap the harvest."

## CHAPTER XIII

### DICK'S OPINION.

"I like him not—his subtle smile
Conceals beneath some purpose vile,
Tho' bland his gaze and fair his speech
Oh trust him not, I do beseech;
For as a seeming simple flower
May hide a scent of evil power,
Which lures with its envenomed breath
The trusting wearer to his death;
So tho' his tongue may kindly prate,
He loathes thee with undying hate."

Now that Basil Beaumont had succeeded in gaining Una's gratitude, if not her friendship, he determined to next win over Dr. Larcher to his side. He had already managed to gain a certain influence over Reginald Blake, but he saw plainly that the worthy vicar was not prepossessed in his favour, and, as he would prove an invaluable ally should Patience prove dan-

gerous, Beaumont was anxious to impress him with a good estimate of his character.

The cynical man of the world seemed to have changed altogether since his interview with Patience Allerby, and no one seeing the interest he took in the simple pleasures of village life would dream that behind all this apparent simplicity he concealed a subtle design. His acting was in the highest degree artificial, yet so thoroughly true to nature that everyone was deceived, and never saw the ravenous wolf hidden under the innocent skin of the lamb.

Of course, Patience Allerby had too minute a knowledge of his real nature to be deceived by the mask of innocence and gaiety he now chose to assume, and as Basil Beaumont knew this only too well, he was anxious to lose no time in raising up to himself an army of well-wishers against the honest indignation of the woman he had deserted should she interfere with his schemes. Mrs.

Larcher, Miss Cassy, Una and Reginald had all an excellent opinion of him, so he was anxious to secure the good wishes of Dr. Larcher, thus leaving Patience to fight her battle single-handed against the crowd of friends he had so dexterously secured.

Notwithstanding the lateness of the season it was a very pleasant day, with a certain warmth and brightness in the air despite the keen wind which was blowing, and on his arrival at the vicarage Beaumont found the young people playing lawn-tennis; Pumpkin and Ferdinand Priggs holding their own in a somewhat erratic fashion against Reginald and Dick Pemberton.

Beaumont sauntered on to the lawn with his everlasting cigarette between his lips, but threw it away as he was hailed joyously by Reginald and the four players, who paused for a moment in the game.

"How do you do, Miss Larcher?" said Beaumont, lazily raising his hat, "this is

a comprehensive greeting, and includes everybody. I've called to see the vicar."

"Papa's out just now," observed Pumpkin, "but he will be back soon. Will you wait, Mr. Beaumont?"

"Thank you—I will," answered Beaumont, sitting down on a garden bench.

"Have a game?" cried Reginald, flinging his racquet into the air and catching it dexterously in his hand.

"Too much like hard work."

"Then have some tea," suggested Pumpkin persuasively.

"Ah, that is better, Miss Larcher," replied Beaumont gaily; "yes, I should like some tea."

"Bring it out here," said Dick, who had thrown himself down on the soft green grass, "it will be jolly having a spread outside."

"How you do misuse the Queen's

English," murmured Mr. Priggs as Miss Larcher went inside to order the tea.

"Only in prose," retorted Dick coolly. "think how you mutilate it in poetry."

"I'm afraid you're rather severe on Priggs," said Beaumont, who was anxious to conciliate everyone, even the poet, for whom he had a profound contempt.

"You wouldn't say so if you saw his poetry," replied Pemberton laughing.

"Oh, come now, Dick," said Reginald lightly, "that's rather hard—some of Ferdinand's poetry is beautiful."

"And gruesome."

"Dick cares for nothing but music-hall songs," explained the poet Ferdinand loftily.

"Oh, yes, I do—for cake and tea, among other things, and here it comes. Make a rhyme on it, Ferdy."

"Don't call me Ferdy," said Priggs, sharply.

"Then Birdie," observed Dick, in a teasing tone, "though you're more like an owl than any other bird."

"Now don't fight," said Pumpkin, who was now seated in front of a rustic table on which the tea-things were set out. "Milk and sugar, Mr. Beaumont?"

"Both, thank you," said Beaumont, bending forward. "By-the way, I saw Miss Challoner to-day—we were talking about you, Blake."

"Were you indeed?" observed Reginald, rather irritated at the free and easy manner of the speaker.

"Yes—about your voice. I got a letter from a friend of mine in town, of which I will tell you later on."

"I suppose Reggy will be leaving us all for London soon," said Dick enviously.

"Lucky Reginald," sighed Ferdinand, "I wish I were going to London."

"What, with a bundle of poems in your

pocket?" said Reginald laughing. "I'm afraid you wouldn't set the Thames on fire —poetry doesn't pay.

"Nor literature of any sort," observed Dick, "at least, so I understand."

"Then you understand wrong," said Beaumont coolly, "you go by Scott's saying, I presume—that literature is a good staff but a bad crutch—all that is altered now."

"Not as regards poetry."

"No—not as regards poetry certainly, but success in literature greatly depends on the tact of a writer; if a young man goes to London with a translation of Horace or Lucian in his pocket he will find his goods are not wanted; if Milton went to Paternoster Row at the present time, with the MS. of 'Paradise Lost' in his hand, I don't believe he would find a publisher. We talk a great deal of noble poems and beautiful thoughts, but it's curious what

unsaleable articles even the best of them are."

"Then what does sell?" asked Ferdinand.

"Anything that pleases the public—a sensational novel — a sparkling Society poem—a brilliant magazine article—a witty play—you'll get plenty of chances to make money with these things; you see people live so rapidly now that they have no time to study in their play hours, therefore they want the very froth and foam of the time served up to them for their reading, so as to take their thoughts off their work. We praise 'Tom Jones' and 'Clarissa' immensely, but who reads them when they can skim the last three volume novel or the latest pungent article on the state of Europe?—no one wants to be instructed now-a-days, but they do want to be amused."

"How do people live in London?"

asked Pumpkin, who, being an unsophisticated country maiden, was absolutely ignorant of anything connected with the great metropolis.

"They live with a hansom cab at the door and their watch in their hand," retorted Beaumont, cynically; "they give two minutes to one thing, five minutes to another, and think they are enjoying themselves—get a smattering of all things and a thorough knowledge of nothing—the last play, the last book, the last scandal, the latest political complication—they know all these things well enough to chatter about them, but alas for the deep thinker who puts his views before the restless world of London—he will have a very small circle of readers indeed, because no one has any time to ponder over his thoughtful prose."

"Still the power of the stage as a teacher," began Ferdinand, "is really——"

"Is really nothing," interrupted Beaumont, sharply; "the stage of the present day is meant to amuse, not to teach—no one cares to go to school after school hours; we are not even original in our dramas—we either translate from the French stage, or reproduce Shakespeare with fine scenery and tea-cup and saucer actors."

"Well, you cannot object to Shakespeare," observed Reginald, who was much interested in Beaumont's remarks.

"Certainly not. Shakespeare, like other things, is excellent—in moderation. I quite agree that we should have a national theatre, where the Elizabethan drama should be regularly acted, but our so-called National Theatre devotes itself to gingerbread melodramas, and tries to hide its poverty of thought under a brilliant *mise-en-scène;* but when you have Shakespeare's plays at three or four theatres and French adaptations at a dozen others,

where does the local playwright come in?"

"But from what I hear there are so few good local playwrights," said Dick, quickly.

"And whose fault is that?" asked Beaumont, acidly, "but the fault of the English nation. France has a strong dramatic school because she produced her own drama to the exclusion of foreign writers; if the English people, who pride themselves on their patriotism, were to refuse to countenance French and German adaptations, the managers would be forced to produce English plays written by English playwrights, and though, very likely, for a time we should have bad workmanship and crude ideas, yet in a few years a dramatic school would be formed; but such an event will never happen while one of our leading playwrights adapts Gallic comedies wholesale and another dramatises old

books of the Georgian period. England has not lost her creative power, but she's doing her best to stamp it out."

"How terribly severe," said Ferdinand.

"But how terribly true," retorted Beaumont, carelessly. "However, I will not preach any more, as I'm sure you must all be tired of my chatter—and see, there is Doctor Larcher coming."

He rose to his feet as he spoke, for the vicar came striding across the little lawn like a colossus.

"Tea and scandal, I suppose," he roared in his hearty voice as he shook hands with the artist.

> "'Hic innocentis pocula Lesbii
> Duces sub umbra.'"

"Certainly innocent enough, sir," observed Reginald, lightly, "but the fact is we have been listening to Mr. Beaumont."

"And the discourse?" asked the vicar, taking a cup of tea from Pumpkin.

"The decadence of Literature and the Drama in England," replied Beaumont, with a smile.

"Ah, indeed, I'm afraid, Mr. Beaumont, I know nothing of the drama, except the Bard of Avon——"

"Whom Mr. Beaumont likes, in moderation," interrupted Pumpkin, mischievously.

"Certainly," assented Beaumont, gravely. "I like all things in moderation."

"Even Horace," whispered Dick to Reginald, who laughed loudly and then apologised for his untimely mirth.

"As to literature," said Dr. Larcher, ponderously, "I'm afraid there is rather a falling off—we are frivolous—yes, decidedly frivolous."

"I wish we were anything half so pleasant," remarked Beaumont, "I'm afraid we're decidedly dull."

"The wave of genius which began with this present century," said the vicar, pomp-

ously, "has now spent its force and to a great extent died away—soon it will gather again and sweep onward."

"If it would only sweep away a few hundred of our present writers, I don't think anyone would mind," said the artist, laughing.

"*Sed omnes una manet nox*," observed Dr. Larcher, with a grim smile.

"What, all our present day scribblers? What a delightful thing for the twentieth century."

Dr. Larcher smiled blandly as he set down his cup, for he liked his Horatian allusions to be promptly taken up, and began to think Beaumont rather good company. He nodded kindly to the whole party, and was about to turn away when a sudden thought struck him.

"Do you want to see me, Mr. Beaumont?" he asked, looking at the artist.

"Yes, I do," replied that gentleman,

rising leisurely to his feet. "I wish to speak to you about Blake, and also I wish Blake to be present."

"Oh, I'll come," cried Reginald, springing forward with alacrity, for he guessed what the conversation would be about.

"Come, then, to my study," said Dr. Larcher. "Pumpkin, my child, you had better come inside, it is getting late."

As the three gentlemen walked towards the house, Pumpkin commenced putting the tea-things together in order to bring them in. Dick, who had risen to his feet, was staring after Beaumont with something like a frown on his fresh, young face.

"What's the matter, Dick?" asked Pumpkin, pausing for a moment.

"Eh?" said Dick, starting a little, "oh, nothing, only I don't like him."

"Whom?"

"Mr. Beaumont," said Pemberton, thoughtfully. "I think he's a humbug."

"I'm sure he's a most delightful man," observed Ferdinand loftily.

"Oh, you'd think anyone delightful who praised your poetry," retorted Dick rudely, "but I do not like Beaumont; he's very clever and talks well, no doubt, but he's an outsider all the same."

"What makes you think so?" said Pumpkin, looking at him with the tray in her hands.

"Oh, I can size a man up in two minutes," observed Dick in his usual slangy manner, "and if I were Reggy I wouldn't give that chap the slant to round on me; he says a lot he doesn't mean, and if he's going to run Reggie's show the apple-cart will soon be upset."

Owing to Dick's lavish use of slang, Pumpkin was quite in the dark regarding

his meaning, so with a quiet smile walked indoors with the tray.

"Reggy can look after himself all right," observed the poet in a placid tone.

"And a jolly good thing too," cried Dick, eyeing the poetic youth in a savage manner, "but prevention's better than cure, and I wouldn't let Beaumont have a finger in my pie if I were Reggy."

"Ah, but you see you're not Reggy."

"I'm uncommonly glad I'm not you," retorted Dick politely. "It must be an awful disagreeable thing for you to know what an arrant idiot you are."

"I'm not an idiot," said Priggs haughtily.

"Not an idiot!" echoed Dick derisively, "why you are such an idiot you don't even know you are one."

END OF VOLUME I.

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